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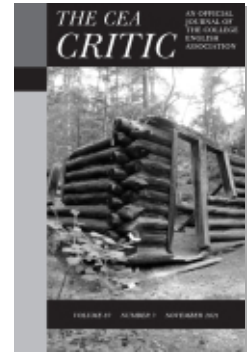
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The Ambivalence of the Turban in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

The turban¹—a long scarf twisted and wrapped around the head—that is simultaneously identified as an Indian, French, and a Turkish headdress in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) serves as a metaphor for the hybrid Victorian England, where cultural identities seem slippery and performative. The novel is structured around the young narrator Marry Smith's train journeys between her sick businessman father in the industrialized Drumble and her single elderly female friends in the neighboring village Cranford, where she used to live. The turban, which the narrator despises as an Islamic headgear, is a traveler like herself that moves hither and thither between East and West. It unsettles cultural distinctions by adorning the heads of an Indian servant, England's former queen Adelaide, French artists, and the English serjeant/magician Signor Brunoni. Although the narrator refuses to bring Matilda Jenkyns, the late Rector's 55-year-old single daughter, a turban from the commercial town of Drumble, it finds its way to Cranford with the magician's and the Indian servant's visits.

The headdress of Christian and Muslim, European and Indian, and poor and the rich characters is a hovering signifier that is always in transit. The cultural mobility of the turban in the novel also hints at the textual construction of the exotic Orient by nineteenth-century European writers and painters. The English magician wears a turban to perform as the Grand Turk while his audience admires his show as a scene from *The Arabian Nights*. Art surpasses the magic show when the ladies of Cranford invent fictional crimes allegedly committed by Signor Brunoni, who might be French or Turkish since both wear turbans. In this way, the turban ceases to be a marker of Turkishness, for the magician turns out to be a former English serjeant, who plays the role of the Grand Turk interchangeably with his twin brother. The turban, then, is a slippery signifier that crosses national, geographical, ethnic, and religious borders and also travels in time from the Crusades to the mid-nineteenth century to portray the presence of the pre-modern medieval past in the progressive Victorian England.

Throughout the novel, the turban stands for what is foreign and hence culturally threatening as the headgear of Indians, French, and Turks, who are equally associated with crime and death in the novel. In "Language, Identity, and Xenophobia," Minna Vuohelainen defines xenophobia as a chronic "irrational fear of *all* foreigners . . . tied to the imperial and migra-

tional conditions" due to "increasing contact between the British and a number of foreign peoples" (315). The novel too portrays xenophobia when Matty, who lives in a white suburban town, shrieks when she sees her cousin Major Jenkyns's Indian servant with a turban. He embodies the fear of the dark and strange India in the colonial adventures of English characters. Indeed, India seems to be a sickening place where the Major takes an "invalid wife" (28), who he keeps away from his relatives, and the magician's six children die of poor health. Signora Brunoni blames the "cruel India" (108) for killing her children, who could have survived in England. By introducing her tragedy with the fairy tale device, "once upon a time" (109), she represents India as an unknown and eerie place that is distant from the technologically advanced England. The novel, however, does not set the nightmarish India as a foil to healthy and safe England, where industrialism ironically brings death: "nasty cruel railroads" (17-18) kill Captain Brown while he tries to save a child from a train accident, and shortly after, his "sickly, pained" (7), and "suffering" (9) forty-year-old daughter dies due to an incurable and undeterminable illness.

France, where turbans are fashionable, seems to be as intimidating as India as Matty's fear of the Indian servant rests on Charles Perrault's French late-seventeenth-century folk story *The Blue Beard*, a serial wife-murderer. Associated with the violent masculinity of the Blue Beard, France has been a threat of invasion since the Norman Conquest of England and the Hundred Years' War. The novel portrays the ongoing political turmoil between the two countries vis-à-vis Mrs. Forrester's late husband, who joins the Peninsular War against the French occupation of the Iberian Peninsula during the Napoleonic Wars. She regards the French as the enemy, "connected with the small thefts" (89) in Cranford and Brunoni as "a French spy," who will "discover the weak and undefended places of England" (90). France is not only a political threat but a peril to Western dress codes, as indicated when Mrs. Forrester remembers seeing the portraits of French intellectuals in turbans. The Cranfordians believe that "wicked Paris, where they are always having Revolutions" (40) kills Miss Matty's sweetheart Thomas Holbrook, a yeoman, who dies right after his long-anticipated trip to the city. A symbol of social change, Paris is allegedly dangerous because it is a culturally hybrid city that welcomes turbans.

France is further set in contact with the Ottoman Empire when an English magician named Samuel Brown wears a turban, mimics French accent, and introduces himself as Signor Brunoni, the Grand Turk. Having learned conjuring as a serjeant in India, he uses the turban to lure his audience into the mysterious Orient described in European travel narratives. In the year of *Cranford's* publication, French writer Théophile Gautier, for example, wrote that the Bosphorus is even "more magical or fairy-like" than "the tales of the 'Arabian Nights'" (90). Likewise, the British writer William M. Thackeray represented Istanbul in his *A Journey from Cornhill to*

Cairo (1844) as a “theatrical picture”: “There the fog cleared off as it were by flakes, and as you see gauze curtains lifted away, one by one, before a great fairy scene at the theatre” (636). Signor Brunoni’s perception of the Orient as an illusionary geography that has no sociopolitical existence is evident with his fake identity, the Grand Turk, which collapses “Ottoman onto Turk” and hence dismisses the Ottoman Empire’s heterogeneity as well as what Reina Lewis describes as “the specificity of Turkish ethnicity” (69). The turban ceases to be a Turkish costume as the ladies recall the popularity of turbans in Paris after Napoleon’s exhibition to Egypt. What is scary on the stage in the absence of actual magic is his ambivalent identity that simultaneously seems French or a brutal Muslim, who killed a neighbor’s dog. The novel mocks their fear of foreigners, for the turbaned conjurer turns out to be an English sergeant, very much like their brothers or cousins in India.

Given *Cranford*’s thesis, the ultimate horror is that the turban no longer, Julia Kristeva writes in her *Powers of Horror*, “lies outside” or “beyond” Victorian England (2). In her study, Kristeva defines *abject* as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The turban, in the novel, is abject in the sense that it disturbs the equation between modernity and the West, which imitates the fashion of the “backward” Orient. The novel envisions modernity as an ambivalent social change that mingles multiple and conflicting cultural practices (e.g. Felski, Berman), such as wearing turbans with a secular attire. The characters are both intimidated and intrigued by the foreign headdress—especially Matty, who longs for a turban but is scared of an Indian servant with a turban and the ladies both adore the so-called Turkish magician and accuse him of all the fictional robberies in *Cranford*. The narrator, on the other hand, is repulsed by the turban which she regards to be “disfiguring” and also promotes Islamophobia by recalling the Crusades (1095–1291) in 1853. She is daunted with the fact that the Medieval Arabs’ turban is sold in the shops of Drumble, suggesting that the present is not cut off from the past and that modernity is not a symmetrical movement upward in the ladder of Westernization.² The novel shows how paradox lies at the heart of modernity in how the turban that evokes the medieval and the Islamic East becomes fashionable in Victorian England.

The novel’s composite form itself evokes the turban in diverse cultural, historical, and religious contexts such as fashion, the Crusades, British colonialism, “The Blue Beard,” and popular Victorian entertainments of magic and circus. When the narrator regards Matty’s letter asking for a turban to be disorderly and hard to “make out,” the novel self-reflexively draws attention to its “loosely episodic structure” (viii) that brings together seemingly irrelevant themes to portray England’s cultural complexity:

She began many sentences without ending them, running them one into another, in much the same confused sort of way in which written words run together on blotting-paper. All I could make out was, that if my father was better (which she hoped he was), and would take warning and wear a great coat from Michaelmas to Lady-day, if turbans were in fashion, could I tell her? (80)

In critiquing Matty's unstructured letter, the narrator fails to see how her friend's random juxtaposition of the turban with pagan celebrations of autumnal (Michaelmas) and spring (Lady-day) equinox stands for Victorian England's multicultural heritage. Wittingly or not, Matty envisions a liminal British culture by recalling a Medieval harvest festival that honors Saint Michael, an archangel in Judaism, Christianity, as well as Islam. Her run-on sentences portray what Aihwa Ong calls "cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space" (4) and time by juxtaposing the 1850s fashion with the Middle Ages. Taken this way, the letter evokes the presence of the past in Matty's reference to the pagan origins of Christian festivals, and the novel bridges the generation gap by befriendng the young narrator with the middle-aged Matty, who asks her to buy the new headdress available in Drumble.

Few studies mention the turban in *Cranford*: Alyson Kiesel rightly observes the "conflation of the turban with the idea of foreignness" (1006); Malcolm Pittock and Jeffrey Cass note Miss Matty's desire for a turban. However, neither study scrutinizes what the turban signifies in the novel. Literary critics focus primarily on sexual politics in Cranford's genteel society of self-sufficient and unmarried elderly women. For instance, whereas Helen Kuryllo and Rae Rosenthal discuss whether the village "in possession of the Amazons" (3) is a feminist utopia, Pittock notes that "because of their subordinate gender position. . . , women are more vulnerable than men" (98). Lisa Niles focuses on aging and sexuality, Deanna L. Davis on social mothering, Anna Lepine on spinsters and domestic space, Carolyn Lambert and John Kucich write on cross-dressing and transgression. There are also many studies on Cranford's capitalist economy (e.g. Andrew Miller and James Arnett), the satire of the eccentric aristocracy (e.g. Eileen Gillooly and Margaret Smith), the novelistic structure (e.g. Hilary Schor, Margaret Croskery, and Natalie Meir), and the narrator (e.g. Wendy Carse). As valuable as these studies are, they overlook how the turban unsettles categories of gender, nationality, and class because it is worn both by men and women and by the British elite and Indian servants.

Karsten Piep is one of the few contemporary critics to read closely representations of Oriental commodities—Turkish carpets, Indian-rubber rings, and Muslim gowns, if not turbans. For Piep, the novel endorses British imperialism in how the magician's wife romanticizes India as a place of spiritual revelation and also praises the "kind and innocent 'natives,'" who "welcome Western intrusion" by bestowing "'rice, and

milk, and sometimes flowers' upon their oppressors" (246). Ironically, Piep equates Orientalist views of characters with that of the author as she claims that "Gaskell's brief description of life in India is a kind of compassionate Orientalism that never transcends nineteenth-century essentialism and therefore is apt to legitimize imperial suppressions . . ." (246–47). What Piep overlooks, however, is that the narrator mocks the Cranfordians' fascination with Matty's brother, Lieutenant Peter, who, on his return from India, tells "more wonderful stories than Sindbad the sailor" (152). The novel highlights the discursivity of the Orient as the ladies imagine both Peter and India vis-à-vis *The Arabian Nights* stories that originated from Indian, Arabic, and Persian cultures.³ *Cranford* ridicules the ignorant aristocrats, whose knowledge of the East is based on fairy tales and who cannot even locate India on the globe. Contrary to Piep's claim, the novel does not endorse Orientalism but instead questions the association of modernization with Westernization as the Ottoman turban becomes popular in Victorian England. The following sections examine how Gaskell's depictions of the turban highlight the performativity of cultural identity that cannot be pinned down to a certain nationality, class, race, or religion.

Turban as a Time Traveler: From Matty to Crusades, the Blue Beard, and Queen Adelaide

The novel unsettles the Western definition of modernity as being, Timothy Mitchell observes, "singular, moving from one stage of development to another" (8), for the turban of Sumerian women in the 3000 B. C. E (Pendergast 60) adorns the heads of nineteenth-century characters. The distinctions between the past and present and the old and the new dissolve as the ancient turban becomes the new fashion in Victorian England. Matty, for example, is disappointed when Mary Smith brings her from Drumble an old-fashioned cap instead of a turban: "I am sure you did your best, my dear. It is just like the caps all the ladies in Cranford are wearing, and they have had theirs for a year, I dare say. I should have liked something newer, I confess—something more like the turbans'" (81). Dismissing the presence of the past, the narrator insists, as Georg Simmel remarks, that fashion "differentiates one time from another" (541) and refuses to bring Matty a turban, which she associates with the alleged Islamic threat in the Middle Ages. The novel, however, does not represent the urban traveler to be more progressive than the turban she regards to be backward; her life lacks a linear progression because she cannot leave her hometown and friends and, hence, repeatedly takes the train back and forth between Drumble and Cranford. Indeed, history seems not progressive but circular as the turban travels from the eleventh to the nineteenth century: the narrator recalls the Crusades as Matty yearns for a sea-green turban; an Indian servant with a turban makes Matty think of the story of Blue Beard; the former Queen Adelaide's turban renders the traditional headgear as fashionable.

The novel's non-progressive plot without climatic change and action also disturbs the progressive image of Victorian England that allegedly moves forward in time in the scales of modernity.

Past and present seem to exist at once (e.g. Scalapino) in Matty's yearning for the new headdress, a sea-green turban, paradoxically indicates her nostalgia for the time her brother Peter leaves for India. Dinah Birch rightly argues in the introduction to the novel that "her openness to change is grounded in an unshakable allegiance to the past" (xviii). However, Birch does not question why Matty specifically idealizes Peter's departure and not another past event, for the sea-green turban is a vehicle for her to satisfy vicariously her desire to travel abroad as a single woman. She temporarily escapes from her rigid circle only by imagining "the long-lost" Peter, who has returned home safe, "beneath some wild sea-wave, or under some strange Eastern tree" (151). The narrator, however, intrudes into her fantasies of an untrodden and unregulated nature by drawing the reader's attention from the sea-green color of the turban to the "bright green canisters" (142) in Matty's teashop of the East India Company, an agent of British Colonialism in India. The green tea that Matty believes to be a "slow poison, sure to destroy the nerves" (144) shatters the soothing effect of the green sea she dreams of in the East. The presence of the English company both in India and Cranford bridges geographical distinctions and evades the possibility of escape from British mores. Matty's presence within the four walls of the teashop suggests that, unlike Peter, she will never have the liberty to travel alone or even wear the turban that is outside the norms of Cranford.

While dismantling Matty's nostalgia for an exotic East, the narrator, too, travels back in time as Matty's wish for a turban reminds her of the Crusaders, who introduced the turban to Western Europe (Jirousek 34). She specifically uses the Medieval term *Saracen* for Arab Muslims to evoke the Crusades, the European Christians' military expeditions to conquer the Holy Land from Arab Muslims and to prevent the spread of Islam in Europe. By tracing the turban back to the threatening Muslims, the narrator "abjectifies" the headdress and hence regards it unsuitable for Victorian women:

I was very glad to accept the invitation from my dear Miss Matty . . . and most particularly anxious to prevent her from disfiguring her small gentle mousey face with a great Saracen's head-turban; and accordingly I bought her a pretty, neat, middle-aged cap, which, however, was rather a disappointment to her when, on my arrival, she followed me into my bed-room, ostensibly to poke the fire, but in reality, I do believe, to see if the sea-green turban was not inside the cap-box with which I had travelled. . . . I had rather that she blamed Drumble and me than disfigured herself with a turban. (81-82)

The narrator's repetition of "disfigured" reveals her fear that the turban will deform not only Matty's face but also the image of Victorian England that associates beauty with Christian ideals of morality, symmetry, and proportion. What is "pretty" – moral and virtuous – for the narrator is the Victorian cap, not the turban that symbolizes the horrors of Islam. The novel, however, does not side with the narrator, who belittles Matty's face as "mousey" (81), for it is Matty who defies Western Christian ideals norms of what is pretty and neat with her wish "to look tidy" (81) by wearing a turban.

The Medieval fear of the non-Christian "other" haunts Cranford in how Matty, her maid Martha, and the narrator are agitated upon Major Jenkyns's arrival with his Indian servant wearing a white turban; its white color signifies Sikhism (Pendergast 93), a religion that was founded in the Punjab region of South Asia in the fifteenth century. The ladies feel dismay – alarmed with a sudden danger or trouble – when they welcome the racially and religiously different man, who can sleep at the inn but not under the same roof with Matty:

We were rather dismayed at their bringing two servants with them, a Hindoo body-servant for the Major, and a steady elderly maid for his wife; but they slept at the inn. . . . Martha, to be sure, had never ended her staring at the East Indian's white turban, and brown complexion, and I saw that Miss Matilda shrunk away from him a little as he waited at dinner. Indeed, she asked me, when they were gone, if he did not remind me of Blue Beard?" (29)

The novel shows how stories such as Blue Beard, "a sinister bearded wife-murderer" (203), often endorse imperialism and become the ground on which Matty imagines a violent Indian masculinity and shrinks away from the servant. His physical difference reminds her of the Blue Beard, a nobleman who kills his curious wives for entering his forbidden chamber where he keeps the corpses of his ex-wives. She sees the French villain in the Indian servant because, Corrie Kiesel analyzes, many British theatrical adaptations of Blue Beard reinforce the fear of the East by replacing its European setting with turbans, mosques, and seraglios (122). As a furthering of this point, in his *Orientalism*, Edward Said notes how "texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (94). In this light, Matty's fear of the Indian servant is also textually constructed by a seventeenth-century story originated in Brittany. The Orientalized Blue Beard in turban justifies the image of brutal India in need of British colonialism.

Beyond as a reference to the past, the novel renders the Medieval headdress as contemporary and intercultural, for the Indian servant as well as Queen Adelaide, the German wife of the former King William IV, who ruled between 1830 and 1837, wear turbans. After receiving the

narrator's gift, a cap, instead of a turban, Matty confesses that she wants "something newer, . . . something more like the turbans Miss Betty Barker tells me Queen Adelaide wears . . ." (81). Ironically, as Betty, the owner of a milliner's shop in Cranford, suggests, the new headdress shatters what Angela Jansen and Jennifer Craik remark as the assumption that "fashion is a Western phenomenon" (9). The novel suggests that even the attire of the crown has never been purely European by recalling the German queen, who also wears a black turban in her 1844 miniature portrait by Sir William Ross. Onur İnal explores in his "Women's Fashions in Transition" how after Napoleon Bonaparte's 1798 expedition to Egypt, turbans become fashionable among the upper-class British women, who displayed their wealth at fancy balls by wearing silk turbans with elegant dresses. The advertisement of turbans in women's magazines suggests that fashion is no longer Eurocentric. "Clothes are an indication of geographic origin," Michel Butor writes (269); the turban, however, crosses geographical borders as the former queen of England, a German, wears the headdress.

The narrator Mary Smith, however, demeans the elite fashion icon as vulgar and common as she shifts back and forth between the turban and George Wombwell's "famous traveling circus" (210), presumably a brute working-class interest in animal tamer and fighting acts with lions and tigers. Ironically, Smith acknowledges the contemporaneity of the turban only within the context of an allegedly repulsive entertainment that, characterizes Peta Tait, "destroyed the morally upright human values that . . . underpinned civilization" (172). Inasmuch, Smith regards the public interest in both as gruesome tastes to be tamed:

if turbans were in fashion, could I tell her? such a piece of gaiety was going to happen as had not been seen or known of since Wombwell's lions came, when one of them ate a little child's arm; and she was, perhaps, too old to care about dress, but a new cap she must have; and, having heard that turbans were worn. . . . (80-81)

The collocation of the circus and the turban renders both as being equally animalistic and brutal: the lion eats "a little child's arm" (81) and the turban, for the narrator, threatens Western Christian civilization. Smith regards both as dangerous and degrading because they violate class distinctions by equally attracting the poor and the rich, a detail confirmed by Brenda Assael's observation in her *The Circus and Victorian Society* that "the working classes, so the argument went, corrupted themselves by participating in irrational amusement like the circus; but so too did the middle classes and elites, who also flocked to the ring" (12). Ironically, the daughter of a tradesman, the narrator ignores the shifting class dynamics in England where the newly rich is the new elite that shares what Tait calls "morbid bad taste" (165) in "a bloody spectacle" (146). Like the circus that mingles

the rich and the working-class, the turban ceases to be a marker of status since it adorns the heads of the Indian servant as well as the former queen.

The Turban as a Theatrical Device

The juxtaposition of the turban with the circus and the magic show within the same chapter suggests that both popular entertainments use the headgear as a vehicle to take the audience from the modern England to the fantastic Orient. Both the actual lion tamer Ellen Sanger in George Wombwell's circus and the fictional Samuel Brown are English performers, who change their names and wear turbans to become "objects of fascination" and "fear" (191). Whereas Signor Brunoni relies on the myth of illusionary and mystical Orient, the novel does not locate the natural or authentic in Victorian England. Indeed, art is not confined within the walls of Cranford's auditorium, for what lies outside the theatre is equally artificial in the ladies' imagining Brunoni's identity vis-à-vis the portraits of turbaned French artists, and the ladies also become narratologists as they cast him the primary suspect of their crime stories. Artifice is at the heart of reality when Brunoni becomes the Grand Turk without being Turkish; the French-Swiss artist Madame de Staël poses in turbans without traveling to the East; the Cranfordians take precautions without the actual threat of burglary. The turban that adorns the heads of an English magician, his twin brother, and French artists portrays identity to be transitory and performative.

Only by masquerading as "the Grand Turk" in a turban can Brunoni defy what Sally Ledger and Roger Lockhurst call the "secular, rationalist, anti-clerical" science, which argues that "all phenomena in the universe operated on determinable, mechanical laws . . ." (221). As the curtains open, the narrator hears "a sentimental voice" describing Brunoni "like a being of another sphere" (86). The audience is uplifted to a fairy-tale-like setting where laws of science do not hold as in the Scheherazade's stories of flying carpets and the djinns. The moment has its roots in history: Christopher Goto-Jones writes in his "Magic, Modernity, and Orientalism" that Orientalism was a "theatrical device" to transport the audience from the modern West to the East: "Orientalism was a legitimate (and exciting) device of the performer of stage magic. . . . Through it was transformed the mundane, familiar, Western male magician . . . into an exotic, mysterious, Oriental with the aura of real magic coruscating around the stage" (1473). Brunoni, too, performs an exotic male identity with his turban to lure the audience into the illusionary – non-progressive and non-industrialized – East. The novel, however, does not let the characters assert their rational identities on the backs of a mystical, spiritual, and hence feminized Turk because the narrator and Miss Pole fail to explain his tricks.⁴ Gaskell satirizes the myth of enlightened England in how both urban and rural women believe in paranormal phenomena: the narrator claims to

see Brunoni coming “forwards from the inner part of the room, to which there is no entrance;” the ladies often tell stories of “conjuration, sleight of hand, magic, witchcraft” (83). The horror is that magic thrives not in a geographically distant and “pre-modern” East but in England where scientific progress did not end the belief in spiritual and mystical forces. The turban ceases to be an indicator of the mysterious Orient, for the novel locates the belief in the supernatural at the heart of Cranford.

In the absence of magic, what renders the show theatrical is Brunoni’s ambivalent turban that cannot be simply labeled as Islamic and Oriental. Elaine Showalter writes in her *Sexual Anarchy* that religious, cultural, and ethnic “boundaries were among the most important lines of demarcation for English society” (5). In this way, the Cranfordians are daunted with his dubious appearance that seems both Muslim and Christian: Miss Pole believes he would have “looked like a close-shaved Christian gentleman” without his beard, but she is also bothered by his “unchristian looks” as she regards him “a Mussulman” (86–87). Her friends are too “mystified and perplexed to the highest degree,” and they “became perfectly awestruck” (87) as they cannot determine his religious identity. The narrator mocks the disoriented ladies, who are relieved to see the Rector at the magic show and hence assume that Brunoni is “sanctioned by the Church” (88). However, the narrator, too, is disturbed with his “very dark and odd” (82) look with a Turkish costume, French accent, and the last name that sounds Italian. She is irritated by his “broken” English that indeed breaks clear lines between Eastern and Western identities. Brunoni’s magic, then, is to perform a fleeting identity as his turban cannot be traced to a certain culture or religion.

In addition to fuzzy boundaries, the text portrays identity to be discursive as the ladies’ perceptions of the magician as a Frenchman rests on Mrs. Forrester (whose husband fought against the French in Spain) and her recollections of the portraits of turbaned artists—namely, the French-Swiss Madame de Staël (1766–1817), the author of *Letters on the Works and the Character of J. J. Rousseau*, and the French diplomat and artist Dominique-Vivant Denon (1747–1825). The English magician’s alleged French nationality is aesthetically constructed by Mrs. Forrester’s museum experience in an indefinite time and space:

Signor Brunoni spoke broken English like a Frenchman, and, though he wore a turban like a Turk, Mrs. Forrester had seen a print of Madame de Staël with a turban on, and another of Mr. Denon in just such a dress as that in which the conjuror had made his appearance; showing clearly that the French, as well as the Turks, wore turbans: there could be no doubt Signor Brunoni was a Frenchman— . . .” (90)

Identity seems as artistic as magic as Samuel Brown’s Turkish stage persona reminds Mrs. Forrester of Madame de Staël, who posed for the French

painter François Gerard (1747–1825). Jennifer Craik argues in her “Exotic Narratives in Fashion” that “exotic references create narratives of difference and distinctiveness both for the designer and the wearer” (98), and, for Helen Borowitz, Madame de Staël was “among the many ladies who liked to wear turbans as emblems of their genius” (46). The nineteenth-century illustrator Dominique-Vivant Denon’s turban, on the other hand, renders him a reliable “expert on Egypt” (211), who joined Napoleon’s expedition and introduced Egypt to the West with his drawings. Denon’s 1820 drawing titled “Head of a Turk, with beard and turban,” verifies for Mrs. Forrester Brunoni’s fame as the Grand Turk. In all, then, the novel highlights the discursivity of identity as the Cranfordians imagine the turbaned magician’s Turkish or Frenchness vis-à-vis the portraits or drawings of nineteenth-century French artists.

The “tantalizing curtain” (86) in the novel’s plot no longer separates either the stage from the auditorium or the turbaned magician from the British audience as the Cranfordians, too, become artists in their inventing crime fiction and playing the role of detectives by spying on the Grand Turk, the intruder to the “genteel,” “well-bred,” “honest and moral town” (89). Ironically, the allegedly Muslim Brunoni is the primary suspect of all “horrid stories of robbery and murder” (91) without the presence of actual crime, other than boys stealing apples or eggs from the market. The novel mocks the Victorian imagination of violent Turkish masculinity as the ladies conclude that Brunoni, who kills a canary on stage, is the killer of a neighbor’s dog that actually dies of “too much feeding and too little exercise” (93). Paradoxically, they are both threatened and allured by the imaginary thief, who can stir up their monotonous lives; in fact, they are jealous of a neighbor, who they believe to be attacked based on a man’s footsteps “underneath the kitchen windows” (92). They become both writers and actors as they believe in the suspense stories they create and arm themselves with footstools against Brunoni, who can presumably open locked doors with magic. The rising stage curtain in the Cranford Assembly Rooms dissolves differences between the magician and the audience by casting both as English artists, who use the stereotype of the turbaned Turk as the backdrop of their mysterious stories.

After the rising curtain, the plot works to expose all else. The Grand Turk becomes the sick man of Europe⁵ as the Cranfordians figure out that the alleged dog-killer and thief has been lying in a cottage with “severe internal injury” (101) after his spring-cart breaks down. Signor Brunoni’s aura vanishes as he appears in a regular attire instead of a turban:

And also wonderful to see how the great Cranford panic, which had been occasioned by his first coming in his Turkish dress, melted away into thin air on his second coming—pale and feeble, and with his heavy filmy eyes, that only brightened a very little when they fell upon the countenance of his faithful wife, or their pale and sorrowful little girl. (103)

Ironically, the Cranfordians and the narrator presume the play as they call Samuel Brown, the Signor, even after they find out that he is an English serjeant, whose injury metaphorically deteriorates the powerful image of the Empire. The narrator describes his eyes as “filmy,” as if they are covered by a turban, which derives from the Turkish word *tülbent* (Jirousek 16), a light, loose-woven, white, and transparent cotton fabric. His cloudy and translucent eyes that evoke *tülbent* helps them to imagine themselves as strong English women nursing a Turk, the sick man of Europe. The text, however, does let the Christian female characters restore their self-confidence on the back of a needy, and, hence, emasculated Muslim who stands for the declining Ottoman Empire: the narrator’s description of their second encounter with the pale magician as his “his second coming” imagines the return of Jesus as a helpless man. Brunoni’s fatal accident that happens right in front of the lodging named the Rising Sun also unsettles the myth of the rising Victorian England as the light-giver and the healer. The novel lifts the veil of the “healthy” British Empire set as a foil to the sick Ottoman Empire as the turbaned Turk and Sam with “filmy eyes” become interchangeable.

The identity of the Turk becomes even more slippery as the magician’s wife informs the narrator that Signor Brunoni is a character who is performed by both Samuel Brown and his twin Thomas, who survives the accident but leaves behind his injured brother. Mrs. Brown regards the turban to be the signifier of “authentic” Brunoni that distinguishes him from Thomas, who “has never been in India, and knows nothing of the proper sit of a turban” (107). Identities become substitutable as Mrs. Brown tells the narrator how her brother-in-law sometimes runs the magic show under the same stage name: “how people can mistake Thomas for the real Signor Brunoni, I can’t conceive; but he says they do; so I suppose I must believe him” (107), she says but also discredits her husband, who underestimates the intelligence of his predominantly female audience. Indeed, Miss Pole claims that the actual Brunoni does not have a beard and insists that they “had been cheated, and had not seen Signor Brunoni after all” (88): “‘That’s not Signor Brunoni!’ said Miss Pole decidedly, and so audibly that I am sure he heard, for he glanced down over his flowing beard at our party with an air of mute reproach” (86), the narrator notes. His self-conscious glance over his beard suggests that the Grand Turk is, in fact, Thomas and, hence, contrary to Mrs. Brown’s claim that the turban is not an indicator of the actual Brunoni, whose identity seems to differ and defer in an endless chain of signifiers. Samuel Brown, a former sergeant in India, enchants his audience with his Turkish costume; Thomas often replaces his brother on stage and assumes his fake identity; there is almost no way to differentiate the two as they both wear a turban and/or beard to become the Grand Turk without ever visiting the Ottoman Empire.

Dissolving Differences

In the end, the culturally unclassifiable turban in *Cranford* highlights the multiculturalism of the British Empire, where there are no clear distinctions between Turkish, French, Indian, and English identities. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said points out that the diversity of imperial identity: "Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (xxv); the novel portrays how even the English suburbs are not exclusively white and Christian with the arrival of the Indian servant and the culturally dubious magician, who both wear turbans. Queen Adelaide's turban as well as Matty's wish for the new headdress suggest that neither fashion nor modernity is synonymous with the West. The novel does not envision England as "a contact zone" between allegedly distinct East and West and Christianity and Islam but instead highlights the impossibility of locating pure or fixed cultural and religious categories.⁶ The turban that simultaneously adorns the heads of an Indian servant, German queen, English magician, and French artists does not articulate national difference. All cultures and periods seem to exist at once as Queen Adelaide and Madame de Staël wear the turban that the narrator associates with the Medieval Arab Muslims. The references to the turban both in the Medieval and Victorian also suggest that a homogeneous West has never existed. The turban that ceases to be a marker of a historical era, geography, status, and religion in the novel embodies the liminality of Victorian England where cultural identities are in transit.

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Notes

¹ Sara and Tom Pendergast explain, "A turban—or hat made of elaborately wrapped, finely woven fabric—adorned the heads of women as early as the Sumerian civilization, which began in 3000 B.C.E. . . . Though little is known about the earliest turbans worn in Mesopotamia, the area in which the Sumerians lived, we do know that the turban became an important form of headwear for men in the Middle East, the Far East, and Africa for much of recorded history. They were common from the earliest years of civilization in India before the third century C. E., and they became popular among Turks after the decline of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 C. E. They are now worn by members of the Sikh religion, as well as by some Muslims and Hindus, in order to show their religious faith" (60–61).

² John Ganim remarks in his *Medievalism and Orientalism* that "the Middle Ages represented in time what the Orient represented in space, an 'other' to the present development of Western Civilization" (85). For Ganim, however, Victorian architecture with medieval elements hints at the continuity between the so-called primitive past and modern present. *Cranford* too surpasses historical distinctions by giving references to the use of the turban both in the medieval and in Victorian period.

³ Gaskell must have used Jonathan Scott's 1811 English translation of Antoine Galland's French version "*Les Mille et Une Nuits* (1704–17) of the Arabian collection

of *The Thousand and One Nights*" (Zipes 43). Richard Burton's translation *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885–86) appeared long after the publication of *Cranford*.

⁴ In her *Colonial Fantasies*, Meyda Yeğenoğlu points out the feminization of the Orient: "The Orient, seen as the embodiment of sensuality, is always understood in feminine terms and accordingly its place in Western imagery has been constructed through the simultaneous gesture of racialization and feminization" (73).

⁵ See Aslı Çırakman for an extensive discussion of nineteenth-century representations of the declining Ottoman Empire as the sick man of Europe.

⁶ In her *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the global today" (4).

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