CHAPTER 2

Inside Egypt

*The Harem, the Hovel, and the Western Construction of an Egyptian National Landscape*

At precisely the same time that monogamous, bourgeois couples and modern, single-family dwellings became the products of Egyptian modernization and centralization, European travelers were emphasizing Egypt’s polygamy, extended families, timeless domestic practices, and bizarre sexual habits. While Egypt’s upper classes assumed marital and domestic relationships that, in fact, separated them culturally from previous generations of Egyptian elites, European travel literature linked nineteenth-century Egyptians to a set of social, cultural, and political traditions that had little to do with the realities of contemporary reform programs. The struggle to “control” Egypt over the course of the nineteenth century was not only waged at the level of realpolitik but rather saw some of its fiercest battles at the level of discourse.¹ Elite Egyptians increasingly defined themselves in terms that would have been familiar to Victorian Europeans, while Western authors were determined to link the habits and customs of the Egyptian upper classes either to imaginary practices or to the traditions of bygone days.²

This chapter considers the role of travel literature in the construction of Western visions of Egypt in the nineteenth century and its role in shaping the British administration’s subsequent understanding of “the Egypt question.” While Europeans in art and travel literature from the nineteenth century depicted the region called Palestine as lacking in peoples and institutions, they reduced Egypt to stereotypes and generalizations.³ Images of Egypt as a country defined by the domestic habits and the sexual politics of the upper-class harem and the squalor of the peasants’ hovel
were instrumental to the British understanding of the territory they occupied in 1882, to their plans for Egypt’s reform, and to their articulation of the terms of their ultimate withdrawal.

In the century preceding the occupation, the territory known as Egypt was seldom described or depicted in travel literature and travel guides without reference to its domestic spaces. The quotidian habits of the upper-class harem and, by contrast, of the peasant hovel — while historically of interest to Western travelers — became objects of fixation during the mid- and late nineteenth century. To know Egypt and to understand its peculiar political and economic institutions was to have entered its homes, traveled through its inner spaces, seen its women. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Europeans came to understand Egypt’s identity from inside the Egyptian domicile.

While tales of Oriental despotism had held seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European reading audiences in a state of awe and terror, it was the lot of the despots’ wives that seemed to capture the nineteenth-century imagination. As Victorian notions of women’s position in the domestic realm became more rigidly defined and more clearly articulated, so too did an antithesis to them: while the Victorians increasingly exalted women as mothers, homemakers, domestic “scientists,” and partners to their husbands, they vilified the inmate of the harem who was, in their fantasies, cloistered, victimized, helpless — the mere object of lust, power, and limitless caprice. Just as the Victorian “angel of the household” was educated, skilled, and relatively autonomous at home, her alter ego was illiterate, unskilled, lazy, backwards, and helpless. Likewise, counter to the ideal Victorian husband who extended freedom to his wife and daughters, the Middle Eastern male was neither partner nor liberator. Rather, he was cruel and irrational, behaving despotically both in the private and political realms.

This fascination with the harem and its inmates fueled a taste for art and literature that journeyed into the Orient’s inner spaces. At the same time that Europe’s economic and territorial interests in Egypt advanced, travelers, painters, and photographers scrambled to the country in increasing numbers, bringing the harem and the private world of Egypt’s upper classes home to audiences that were fascinated, repulsed, and titillated by what they read and saw. Early ethnographies such as Edward Lane’s *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836), for example, opened up the private world of Egypt’s upper classes through detailed descriptions of the activities (real and imaginary) of harem women. One of the most widely read of Lane’s chapters was that entitled “Domestic
Life (Women of the High and Middle Orders),” in which the author depicted women as heirs to a life of both pleasure and deprivation. Activities such as pipe smoking, coffee drinking, reclining, gossiping, and the visiting of other harems constituted the focus of Lane’s “investigations.” Such ethnographies served to eclipse knowledge of the positions that upper-class women actually held in their homes and of the wide range of their activities and responsibilities. The result was a European fixation with Oriental indolence and cloistered, helpless, abused women.

Of Hearth and the “Odd” Habits of Home

While in preceding centuries travelogues most often depicted Egypt as a region among the many in the Orient, the nineteenth century witnessed Egypt’s appearance as a distinct “national” entity, full of particularly Egyptian institutions, behaviors, and proclivities. French historian Jean-Marie Carré, for example, has concluded that until the early nineteenth century, Egypt was represented in travel literature as a place that one simply passed through in order to get someplace else. Carré argues that while the publishing of Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* in 1721 brought with it a whole host of other kinds of “letters” (from Istanbul, Moscow, or Lima), a *Lettres égyptiennes* never appeared. Egypt was viewed by Europeans as occupying the borders between the “known” world and the world of monsters and extraordinary dangers. Egypt was variously cast as the blessed territory in which the Holy Family sought refuge; as a repository of Hellenic heritage; as the house of Islam; as the capital of a dangerous empire. Rarely did Egypt appear as a distinct entity.

In the early nineteenth century, however, a new obsession with Egypt materialized, and along with it came new devices for the study of Egypt—new categories through which the country could be analyzed. Some of the “lenses” through which Egypt had traditionally been viewed were maintained: Islam, for example, continued to be a category for assessing the ideologies and institutions of the modern Egyptians. Likewise, “despotism” continued to be the most common means of explaining the Egyptian body politic and the behavior of its rulers. At the same time, the traveler’s attention was turned toward new arenas. While Egypt’s body politic had not been forgotten, the domicile had become the focus for uncovering and understanding Egypt’s secrets. The West’s repertoire of stories about the “palace peculiarities” that first tainted and then undermined Isma’il’s rule was informed by a very specific knowledge of his
domestic habits, and of his “inner” nature, and the tellers of those stories were determined to label Isma'il and his behavior “Egyptian.” The secrets found within the living spaces of Egypt’s ruling elite were thus used to shape an Egyptian landscape on which the colonial experience was later played out.

Descriptions of Egyptians’ living quarters were certainly included in travel literature that preceded the nineteenth century. However, early commentary is distinguished by the seeming disinterest in the subject of the home. Travelers often described Egyptian homes from the outside and from a distant vantage point, as if the task of depicting the domicile was to place it into some kind of grander vista or a larger cityscape. An eye for urban spatial arrangements and design was commonplace when living quarters were assessed, as illustrated in the description of Cairo written by the Englishman Abraham Parsons in the late eighteenth century:

In Cairo there are many broad streets and open, airy places, but this is the case only in the skirts [sic] of the town, as the greatest parts of the streets are narrow, the houses being from two, three and four stories, all of burnt brick which project so as to command a prospect to both ends of the street, which has this inconvenience, that they approach so close to those which are opposite as to make it disagreeable. The tops of the houses are flat, on which people enjoy the fresh air in the evening.10

Color, construction materials, and decorative style all caught the eye of travelers to Egypt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as did the general appearance of Cairo’s homes. The Frenchman Jean Coppin, who visited Egypt in the late seventeenth century, never entered an Egyptian dwelling, but he enjoyed the facades of the different homes and was intrigued by the materials with which they were built. He had relatively little to say about houses in Cairo, but did remark that “generally the houses that make up a town aren’t very nice to look at from the outside; their windows are closed and they have a rather melancholy countenance.”11 While Coppin’s comments reflect a certain measure of distaste for his surroundings, they also display a kind of superficial disinterest, perhaps indicating that the domicile was relatively unimportant to his understanding of his surroundings.

When examining the exterior of the peasants’ quarters, however, Europeans frequently gave lengthy descriptions of the size, shape, and manner of their construction. In a passage characteristic of the era in which it was written, Coppin’s contemporary Antonius Gonzales said: “The fel-laheen’s houses are for the most part built of sun-dried bricks and clay.
Their roofs are made of lath-work and boards, or of beams to which they attach palm fronds. On top of that, they put on two or three layers of clay, which under the hot sun becomes hard as stone and lasts a man’s lifetime. All the houses in the villages are whitewashed.”

By the nineteenth century, distant descriptions of Egyptian homes gave way to detailed accounts of the inner world of the domicile that were as minute in their description as they were thorough in their coverage. One author, calling herself “Riya Salima,” perfectly summarized the nineteenth-century project of knowing the inner world of the Egyptian domicile when she said, “You will want to get inside the harem in order to know it intimately.” If the house was a mystery from the outside, it had only to be “entered” so that its contents could be revealed.

Salima’s text left no detail of the size, shape, or contents of the harem to the reader’s imagination. Everything that she found and witnessed within the walls of the domicile was chronicled for the reader in exquisite detail:

Let us enter into one of these harems . . . Here is the eunuch at the door . . . Here we are in the entrance which is like ours but more open and with more light. There are many couches, a small, round inlaid table, a chandelier, a few small tables laden with ashtrays and cigarettes—these are the classic furnishings. This is where one receives guests during the summer, and where the family prefers to gather. As for the rest of the harem, the rooms don’t seem to me to be as big or as luxurious.

Here the position of Salima is much less that of an “observer” than an invited guest. Salima in fact wrote the book as if she was the owner of the harem, writing to a Western reader. “In providing you with a description of my house . . . I imagine the bizarre conclusions that you have drawn.” Her images are detailed and personal rather than disinterested and abstract.

The inside of the peasant hovel received as much attention as the harem. By midcentury, meticulous descriptions of every aspect of the peasants’ quarters were also commonplace. The dirt, disease, and squalor that were attributed to the interior space of the hovel were as fascinating to the traveler as the contents of the houses themselves:

The internal arrangement of a fellah house is extremely simple . . . these rooms might be compared to two shabby bee-hives, about six feet at the widest part. The ‘forn’ mentioned in the story of Sheikh Abd-al-Haj is the most important piece of
furniture. It is a kind of permanent bedstead, built of brick, and containing an arched stove or oven, which serves to give warmth in winter, especially at night, as well as for the purpose of cooking. The whole family, father, mother and children, sometimes spread their mats on this bed of ware, which, being fed with dung-fuel, bakes them gently until morning. . . . Chairs and tables are, of course, unknown and desired by the fellah, but some of them possess a sort of stand a few inches high, circular, and called a ‘soofra,’ resembling the article of furniture used in cities. . . . I admit that the poorest class of dwellings which I have described . . . cannot be visited without some danger of suffocation and some offense to delicate nostrils. I do not allow this to be a matter of reproach to the owners. Clean poverty and healthy misery are not to be met with every day, neither in Egypt nor elsewhere.17

The home, then, was not only besieged by the traveler but subjected to a very specific kind of investigation. Knowing Egypt’s domestic spaces meant not only entering them but chronicling them in intimate detail. Egypt was seen not through the distant panoramas that characterized earlier literature but from an intrusive proximity. Knowledge and intimacy were combined in the quest to get inside Egypt’s inner spaces and to expose their secrets.

Inside Ancient Egypt: Europe’s Quest for the Pharaonic Past

Accompanying the nineteenth-century scramble to enter Egypt’s domestic realm was a determination to uncover the secrets of its pharaonic heritage through the exploration of its ancient monuments. Mid-nineteenth-century Europe witnessed a fascination with Egypt’s pharaonic heritage, an “Egyptomania” that sent an increased number of tourists to Egypt annually and swelled the ranks of societies dedicated to the study of Egypt’s past. The result was a conflation of the past and the present and a tendency on the part of Europeans to attribute the pharaonic past to contemporary Egyptians and their institutions.18 The territory between the Sudan and the Mediterranean thus quickly became filled with what Europeans claimed was a particularly Egyptian heritage. Modern Egyptians were cast as the descendants of a spectacular, admirable, and, most important, discernibly Egyptian people. Consequently, Egyptians were set apart from their contemporaries in North Africa, the Levant, and the Arabian peninsula in the Western imagination.

When Napoleon landed in Egypt in 1798, he had with him an entourage that included more than 150 scholars and technicians, includ-
ing a number of cartographers and surveyors. He quickly put them to work uncovering Egypt’s past.¹⁹ The result of Napoleon’s determination to find ancient Egypt was the establishment of Egypt as a “field of study”; and for the first time, Egyptian antiquities were subjected to serious and systematic investigations. Shortly after the invasion, Napoleon established l’Institut d’Égypte, designed to house his cadre of scholars and their projects. The result of their efforts was *Description de l’Égypte*, the production of which left no stone and no object unturned and unchronicled in a quest to “know” Egypt and to write its history.

The text set crucial precedents in the production of knowledge about Egypt. To begin with, it demonstrated that Egypt could best be known through thorough descriptions of all that was found there, from its languages, religions, monuments, and topography to its history and natural resources. Tribal relations, military conquests and defeats, and agricultural practices all found their way into the *Description*. A more thorough catalogue of things Egyptian has never been written by a European. The scholars who eventually wrote the *Description* did, in fact, spend a great deal of time chronicling the inside of Egypt’s edifices. They entered and examined mosques and churches, fortresses, seats of government, private homes, and, to the delight of European audiences, pharaonic temples, tombs, and monuments.²⁰

Egypt’s pharaonic past became increasingly accessible in 1822, with Champollion’s discovery of the Rosetta Stone, the cracking of its linguistic code, and the subsequent production of “knowledge” about hieroglyphics. “Guides” to the past such as the *Description* and access to the secrets of the hieroglyphs allowed for Egypt’s literal invasion by Westerners in search of pharaonic history. A rush took place to “discover” the glories of Egypt’s past. By the 1870s, the Thomas Cook Travel Company of London had produced a travel guide that included a complete dictionary of hieroglyphs and a “primer” for understanding the language; visitors to Egypt were encouraged to understand “ancient Egyptian” before learning simple phrases in modern Egyptian Arabic, and the Arabic-English dictionary was considerably less substantial than the “primer.”²¹

Thus the early and mid-nineteenth century witnessed the growth of enthusiasm for a particular historical narrative about Egypt. This narrative tended to gloss over large periods of history and to leave others out. Absent from it were discussions of Roman and Hellenic invasions and settlements and, along with them, the establishment of Christianity as Egypt’s once-dominant religion. Perhaps most important, it ignored the
Arab invasions that, beginning in the mid-seventh century, brought Arabic, Arab culture, and Islam to Egypt and the marginalization of pharaonic and Christian paradigms.\textsuperscript{22} The resulting myopia about Egypt’s past was well summed up by one late-Victorian traveler, for example, when he said that “to most of us, Egypt means three or four things only: A long, narrow strip of eternally, encircling water in the midst of a green avenue of country . . . all along its banks are . . . reeds in which dwells a kind of ubiquitous Moses . . . (and) a Lotus air where even mummies . . . are by no means out of place.”\textsuperscript{23} Egypt had ceased to be a central part of the Arab-Islamic world and had become the “land of the Pharaohs.”

There were undoubtedly reasons besides the growing fascination with the pharaohs for the ascendance of this new territorial and cultural construction of “Egypt”: the landing of Napoleon’s troops and the subsequent struggle between England and France for dominance in Egypt; increased activity in India and the need to maintain safe passage to it through Egypt; as well as the establishment of Mohammad `Ali’s breakaway political dynasty in 1805. Nonetheless, by imbuing the territory known as Egypt and all its historically shifting borders with a predominantly pharaonic history — a history that none of the other territories in the Arab-Islamic Orient possessed — the Western descriptive genre and the travelogue of the nineteenth century did much to make the borders of Egypt rigid and distinct. The “plan” for touring Egypt inevitably placed the traveler inside the past:

Climb the Great Pyramid, spend a day with Abou on the summit, come down, penetrate into its recesses, stand in the king’s chamber, listen to the silence there, feel it with your hands, — is it not tangible in this hot fastness of incorruptible death? — creep, like the surreptitious midget you feel yourself to be, up those long and steep inclines of polished stone, watching the gloomy darkness of the narrow walls, the far-off pin-point of light borne by the Bedouin who guides you . . . Now you know the great Pyramid. You know that you can climb it, that you can enter it. You have seen it from all sides, under all aspects. \textit{It is familiar to you.}\textsuperscript{24}

Beginning with the pyramids of Giza, “knowing” Egypt entailed scaling and entering the monuments, ascending and descending such that the secrets of their construction might be revealed. Amelia Edwards betrayed the extent to which “knowing” ancient Egypt required penetration when she wrote about her first visit to Giza: “We started immediately after an early luncheon, followed by an excellent road all the way, and were back in time for dinner at half past six. But it must be understood that we did not go to \textit{see} the pyramids. We meant only to look at them.”\textsuperscript{25} Travelogues
and guidebooks taught travelers how to undertake the rigorous process of knowing the past, as evidenced by a passage from a handbook printed in 1885: “The ascent of the Pyramid is perfectly safe. The traveler selects two of the importunate Bedouin and proceeds to the Northeast corner of the Pyramids where the ascent usually begins. . . . The strong and active attendants assist the traveler to mount by pushing, pulling and supporting him.”

Travel literature also guided visitors through the pyramids’ inner depths, providing vivid detail of what was found in them. Edward Lane’s sister, Sophia Lane Poole, visited the pyramids in the 1840s and recorded both the activity of entering the pyramids and the “knowledge” that her visit to Egypt had afforded her. Her instructions for getting inside the pyramid were vivid, and her knowledge of its dimensions complete: “Before the traveler enters the pyramid he should divest himself of some of his clothes. . . . The passage by which we enter the Great Pyramid is only four feet high and three foot six inches in width.”

Lane Poole’s descriptions of the inner realms of the pyramids, of their passages and their chambers, differed little from her descriptions of harems, illustrating the extent to which tours of Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century were shaped by peregrinations through the insides of both the ancient and the modern. While tours offered by fledgling companies like Thomas Cook defined Egypt through the sites and monuments, memoirs such as those written by Lane Poole attest to a second “tour” that outlined Egypt through realms that were hidden from the eye. Distinctions between ancient and modern were practically indiscernible when one looked from the inside out, as evidenced by descriptions of the Great Pyramid and Mohammad ‘Ali’s harem: “On emerging, we find ourselves at the foot of the Grand Passage. . . . This one ascending to the main chamber is, in comparison with those which lead to it, wide and lofty. It is lined above and below and on each side with blocks of limestone. The roof is formed of long blocs of stone leaning against each other.”

Lane Poole then entered and traversed the harem in precisely the same fashion: “We then ascended by an ample marble staircase to the salon on the first floor. This is a very splendid room, paved with marble as indeed are all the passages, and I imagine all the apartments on the ground floor. . . . The ceiling . . . is painted admirably in shades of dark and light blue. . . . The corners and cornices are richly decorated.” The portrait of modern Egypt that was the result of tours through Egypt, both those actually undertaken by tourists and those that took place in the armchair,
were constructed out of Egypt’s hidden spaces as well as its monuments, pulling the private world inexorably into the process through which Egypt was known.

European travelers were fond of using what they found inside of pharaonic monuments as keys to understanding modern Egyptians, for measuring the achievements of the past against those of the present. From the art that they discovered on temple walls, for example, travelers ascertained that modern Egyptians resembled the ancients: “Egyptians . . . have preserved the same delicate profile, the same elongated eyes, as mark the old goddesses carved in bas-relief on the Pharaonic walls.”30 In appearance, technique, and machinery, it was decided, the Egyptian fellahen resembled their pharaonic ancestors, “the humble subjects of Amenophis and Seti,” making them the robust descendants of the farmers who had once toiled on the banks of the flooded Nile and setting them apart from the ranks of the Orient’s peasantry.31 Finally, harem women were said to possess the visage of the Pharaonic princesses. It was often stated that “they would only have to do their hair in tiny braids in order to resemble Hofert Hari or Isenophé.”32

By constructing the pharaonic past as the source and generator of Egyptian character, Western travelers inevitably constructed a yardstick by which the present could be measured. The obvious achievements of the ancient Egyptians served as reminders of modern Egyptians’ potential, of the greatness that was in their grasp. At the same time, however, the pharaohs served as a sad reminder of that lost glory. Europeans found the modern Egyptians to be far less capable than their ancestors. Said Florence Nightingale after her trip to Egypt: “Without the [pharaonic] past, I conceive Egypt to be utterly uninhabitable.”33

In Every Home an Odalisque:
Everyday Habits of the Domestic Realm

Once Egypt’s interior realms had been entered and their contents sorted through and catalogued, the activities of its modern inhabitants were subjected to the traveler’s investigations. While both men and women and their daily activities were the object of the Western traveler’s curiosity, Egyptian women and their habits attracted the most curiosity. Throughout the nineteenth century, the domestic realm was the arena in which foreigners “observed” women’s daily habits and through which they could comment on women’s position in Egyptian society.
Like depictions of the Egyptian house itself, descriptions of women and their daily activities changed markedly in the nineteenth century. In late-seventeenth-century literature, for example, it was women’s appearance—their size, shape, and the style of their clothing—rather than their activities that made up the list of descriptions through which womanhood was presented: “The countrywomen are usually small and dark-skinned. Their beauty comes from their fiery eyes. The conversation that they make is very boring, and the way they dress is not pleasing. The women of the upper classes are better raised and nicer in every way.” Much like the discussion of homes with which this chapter began, this description of women is not wholly positive. The above “focus” on women, however, is distant and somewhat disinterested and does not take up either the “inner” or the “essential.”

By the early nineteenth century, however, women embracing the tasks and burdens of domestic life began to take up the most considerable space in travel literature. Edward Lane devoted a great deal of his *Manners and Customs* to domestic life; the reader was caught up in lengthy discussions of food, furnishings, and the activities of the home’s occupants. About the daily life of peasant women, he said: “The women of the lower orders seldom pass a life of inactivity. . . . Their chief occupations are the preparing of the husband’s food, fetching water (which they carry in a large vessel on the head), spinning cotton, linen, or woolen yarn, and making the fuel called ‘gellah,’ which is composed of the dung of cattle.”

Often it was the most private domestic activities that were “reported” by the traveler: “As soon as it is light the poor woman gets up from her mat and shakes herself; or, if the weather is hot, she has been sleeping outside with her family. Having thus completed her toilet, she and her husband and children gather around a small earthen dish containing boiled beans and oil, pickles or chopped herbs, green onions or carrots.” Similarly, travelers entered the harem and recounted the daily agendas of its inhabitants for the reader: “The care of their children is the primary occupation of the ladies of Egypt . . . their leisure hours are mostly spent in working with the needle, particularly in embroidering. . . . The visit of one harem to another often occupies nearly a whole day. Eating, smoking, drinking coffee and sherbet, gossiping and displaying their finery are sufficient amusements to the company.” Accompanying this was a catalogue of the items used for preparing tea, eating meals, and smoking; men and women both were illustrated eating and smoking the pipe. Salima’s tour of the harem was also accompanied by lengthy descriptions
of the silver items used to make and serve refreshments, and with which tobacco could be consumed.

Habits such as smoking the water pipe were routine subjects in nineteenth-century travel literature. They represented the “exotic” and “debauched” activities that occurred in the Egyptians’ private, domestic space. Because such “bizarre” habits took place indoors, the house became a source of intrigue and mystery. While habits like pipe smoking came to symbolize “inner mystery,” female degradation, and Oriental fecklessness over the course of the nineteenth century, they did not represent debauchery in texts from earlier centuries.

Le Père Antonius Gonzales’s seventeenth-century *Le Voyage en Égypte*, for example, contains an illustration that shows that the “odd” and the “depraved” habits that had come to be located in Egyptian homes were, at one time, depicted as having taken place outside, in open spaces. Gonzales described pipe smoking as an act of innocents, of children, rather than the activity of the immoral, over-sexed inmates of the harem. At the same time, Gonzales depicted pipe smoking as a shared activity and not as the lot of the segregated realm of women. The smokers stood rather than reclined, such that laziness and fecklessness are not connoted. Finally, while the smokers appeared to be members of the urban, upper classes, they were not confined to the harem. Their activities did not take place in secret, or in closed homes, and there was no mystery about them.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the daily activities of both the harem and the hovel became not just the object of mystery and curiosity, but also a means through which commentary about Egyptian society could be issued. The most typical of that commentary was that women’s habits were “peculiar,” and that they illustrated the “degraded” position of women in Egypt. Prior to the nineteenth century, harem activities, while illustrating the luxuries of the Orient, did not necessarily connote “odd” or “degraded.” In the late eighteenth century, for example, a certain Monsieur Savary noted that harem women lived a pampered existence, saying that slaves did most of the work while the “wives” relaxed: slaves served coffee, sherbet, cakes, and endless rounds of tea. As for their mistresses: “The women chat, they laugh, they frolic.” He also wrote that one of the women’s favorite activities was the telling of stories. Women were said to sing little songs, to recite novels, and to perform dances for one another. In other words, the author reported that these women lived a life of leisure, but absent from his descriptions is any explanation that their activities were immoral, useless, or backwards.

Lane’s descriptions of the harem resemble Savary’s, but they contain
a critical difference: attached to his narratives about women’s activities is commentary, both direct and subtle, about the purpose of those activities, about their purported frivolity or lack of worth. To the above description about the women’s telling of stories, for example, Lane added: “When their usual subjects of conversation are exhausted, sometimes one of the party entertains the rest with the recital of some . . . facetious tale.”

According to Lane, women’s conversations did not involve the use of intellect and were not designed to elevate or raise their moral state. Rather, stories were the lot of lies and make believe.

Others were more direct in denigrating the harem, calling its activities “perverse and idiotic” and its lifestyle “idle.” Some compared what they saw in the harem directly to what they had read about Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights*. Upper-class women’s behavior was most particularly criticized when it involved their relationships with men. If women were “idle” and idiotic in their telling of stories, they were lascivious when it came to their husbands. Again, Lane’s text is instructive: “The wives of men of the higher and middle classes make a great study of pleasing and fascinating their husbands by unremitting attentions, and by various arts. Their coquetry is exhibited, even in their ordinary gait when they go abroad, by a peculiar twisting of the body.”

Just as the harem’s activities were cast as taking place in hidden, remote spaces, domiciles themselves were often depicted as being “hidden” in dark, twisted alleys, on poorly lighted streets, on lanes so narrow that donkeys could barely pass through them, making the location of the domicile as mysterious as the activities that it contained. In many passages, the domicile’s facade took on the same elements of treachery and secrecy that were the lot of its inner activities:

As we turn onto one of the narrow lanes that intersect the Mohammaden City [Cairo], we are struck not only by the vivid incongruities of the street scenes which travellers have so often described, but by the contrast between the noise and bustle of the crowded alley and the quiet silence of the tall houses that overhang it on each side. Here there is no sign of life; the doors are jealously closed, the windows shrouded by those beautiful screens of net-like woodwork which delight the artist and tempt the collector. If we enter one of these gates . . . we shall find the inner court almost as silent and deserted as the guarded windows that overlook the street. We shall see nothing of the domestic life of the inhabitants, for the women’s apartments are carefully shut off from the court.

Shrouded in mystery, the home contained Egypt’s essence, as well as its secrets.
Outdoor Habits Veiled in the Harem’s Intrigue

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the mysteries of the home began to be ascribed to women’s activities within the public realm. In particular, veiling, segregation, and the relations between men and women in public became highly charged with negative meaning. The street became an extension of the harem, and the veil was made the public manifestation of segregation and seclusion. The result was a blurring of Egypt’s inner and outer realms and the creation of a seamless image of Egyptian behavior, wherein the public was but an extension of the private. In other words, the evils of the harem could be found everywhere.

Often, late-nineteenth-century travelogues compared veiled women outside of their homes to segregation, attributing both customs to the “closed world” of Oriental secrets. One traveler, for example, contrasted life in Egypt, which he thought to be generally open, to life for women:

Life goes on in the open streets to an extent which always surprises us. . . . People drink tea, smoke, pray, sleep, carry on all their trades in sight of the passers by. . . . But, into the recesses of the harem and the faces of the women one may not look. And this last mystery and reserve almost outweighs the openness of everything else. One feels as if he were in a masquerade; the part of the world which is really most important—womankind—appears to him only in shadow and flitting phantasm. What danger is he in from these wrapped and veiled figures which glide by, shooting him with a dark and perhaps wicked eye? . . . I seem to feel that this is a mask of duplicity and concealment.

In earlier literature, the confinement of women to the domestic realm and the lack of interactions between men and women in public were devoid of any particular sociosexual meaning; upper-class decorum simply dictated the separation of the sexes. Another passage, for example, written in the late seventeenth century, claims nothing astonishing about the fact that men and women did not speak if they happened to encounter one another in the streets: “Married women and honorable unmarried women . . . never venture into places where men can be found. No one ever sees a man address a woman in the streets. . . . When women move about in the streets, they do so with modesty and in an edifying manner. When a man visits a private residence, women either cover their faces or retire [to their quarters] until he departs, even when their husbands are present.” While in nineteenth-century discussions of segregation and veiling such descriptions were usually followed by commentary about the evils of veiling and segregation as well as the barbarity of the men who
perpetrated them, the above account was simply accompanied by further
descriptions of the women who practiced such customs. Women, for
example, were described as being “richly” dressed or covered in precious
jewels. One author found women’s character to be as pleasing as their
clothing, which was, from head to toe, made of silver and gold. 47

Coppin noted the absence of women in the streets and in Cairo’s com-
cmercial districts, saying simply that “they are hidden in secret apartments
of houses in such a way that people who visit those houses never see
them.” 48 The absence of women on the streets was noted in seventeenth-
century literature, but was not the object of commentary. Likewise,
descriptions of the veil before the nineteenth century seem to be included
in travel literature as a kind of afterthought. Le Père Gonzales, for exam-
ple, mentioned the veil only after a lengthy description of the various
styles, colors, and materials that made up women’s clothing of that
period: “But when they do go out, you can’t tell a thing about them, as
they are entirely covered.” 49 Coppin, like Gonzales, was as concerned with
the turban, worn by men, as he was with the veil, and spent as much effort
describing the ways in which men went about covering themselves. He
claimed that both Egyptian men and women were so accustomed to cov-
ering their heads and faces that it was often difficult to tell them apart.
Coppin paid great attention to the hierarchies of class and the corre-
sponding color of turban that Cairenes wore and went to great lengths
to inform the reader about how to tell the sexes and classes apart by the
cut, style, and color of a person’s headdress. 50

Others attributed the use of the veil to honor and to the protection of
women’s “dignity” but did not connect the veil to any sort of cultural
degradation. Said Abraham Parsons: “When the ladies walk out to visit
each other, or go to their prayers at the mosque, or to the baths, which
in general happens once a week, on Thursday, they are, on such occasions,
attended by female servants only, who are as closely veiled as the ladies,
it being a mark of infamy for a woman to appear abroad unveiled; all
prostitutes, on the contrary, are obliged to appear with a naked face.” 51
Here it was only “fallen women” who exposed their faces, and the veil was
a sign of dignity and respect, rather than degradation. Love and passion
were also cited as reasons for keeping women veiled, as was superstition.
To the Frenchman Benoit Mailllet, who wrote in the mid-eighteenth cen-
tury, the veil was simply the means by which Egyptian women were pro-
tected from the “evil eye,” and did not connote a social evil. 52

By the nineteenth century, however, veiled women were being com-
pared to the dead, to mummies, and to witches, illustrating the extent to
which Europeans found themselves both fascinated and repulsed by
women and the veil. Sir Frederick Treves explained: “In the crowd, too,
are veiled women in black who would seem to be items detached from a
funeral pageant, as well as bent old crones who, upon the addition of a
conical hat . . . and a cat, would turn into witches.”

The veil was also a trope through which Victorian travelers discussed
sex or the “sexual” nature of Egyptian society. Often it was noted that
Egyptian women could be found — both inside the home and outside of
it — naked but for their veils. Lane made reference to harem women who
refused to be seen without a veil but who thought nothing of leaving their
bodies unclothed. Peasant women, as well, appeared to know no shame
when it came to “exposing” their bodies while keeping their visage cov-
ered: “There have been many instances of women who, upon being sur-
prised naked, eagerly covered their faces. . . . The Egyptian peasants
never give their daughters shirts till they are eight years of age. We often
saw little girls running about quite naked . . . all wore veils.”

So common was the comparison made between home and the world
outside of it, that veiled women often appeared simply to be extensions
of the home itself and became part of the Egyptian cityscape — gray, mys-
terious, and frightening: “We find we are caught in a cul de sac and turn
back. We come upon a creature entirely enveloped in a large brown or
striped gray cloth, and as our glance lights upon it, it darts in at an open
door. Another creatur . . . that does not at once find a place of refuge
squeezes itself close to a wall till we have passed by.” Here, veiled
women are not only frightening, but possess the characteristics of ani-
mals. Brown and darting, they mimic the habits of Cairo’s many rats, the
removal of which, during the years of the occupation, was the obsession
of many a British colonial official.

In Every Home a Family:
Motherhood and the Private Realm

As the balance of power between Europe and Egypt began to tilt in
Europe’s favor and as the merits of Egypt’s body politic became cast in
doubt, the question of what to do about reforming Egypt became more
consistently articulated in the West. The result was a relentless “search” for
the causes of Egypt’s decay, a search that led to the harem and the hovel
and to the implication of the private realm as the source of Egypt’s ills (as
well as its potential rejuvenation).
New to nineteenth-century travel literature was commentary about Egyptian men—rulers and ruled alike—as being the products of Egyptian home life. The habits and customs as well as the moral characteristics that were acquired by children in the harem and the hovel became more and more frequently attached to commentary about Egypt’s public realm and its weaknesses. Victorian travelers to Egypt believed that both upper-class and peasant homes produced unsound citizens. One of the most deleterious results of the harem, as Victorians imagined it, was the result that the harem’s alleged depravity, isolation, and sensuality had on motherhood. Since a woman’s skills were, according to most travel literature, limited to sex, dancing, singing, smoking, and telling stories, it was thought unlikely that she would know how to be a good homemaker or a suitable role model for her children. She would bequeath no homemaking skills to her daughters, leaving the future of Egypt in jeopardy:

Egyptian society has its undoubted merits. . . . But in the essentials of civilization the Egyptians have everything to learn. In education they generally lack the rudiments, and in the higher department of morals they have hardly made a beginning. The fatal spot . . . is the position of women. . . . The early years of childhood, perhaps the most critical of a whole life, are tainted by the corrupt influences of the harem. . . . The reforming power of a lady is seldom possessed in the East. The restoring and purifying influence of wife on husband, of mother on child, of a hostess upon her guest is never felt. . . . In a word, the finest springs of society are wanting.  

Peasant women did not escape such critiques. Like their upper-class counterparts, Western travelers found peasant women lacking in domestic skills. Despite the fact that Westerners saw the hovel as a simple structure with little in it to demand a woman’s attention, they believed that the widespread lack of education among the peasantry made it impossible for a young fellaha to run a family’s domestic affairs. According to Mary Whately, “Of course it follows that the poor little things are not to guide the house. Even a peasant’s household, where so little is to be done, cannot be left in the hands of a mere child.”

The peasants’ putative laziness, stupidity, and love of filth were also listed as causes of the “low condition” of their living quarters. Charles Dudley Warner wrote: “Nothing but earthen floor and grime everywhere. . . . This is, on the whole, a model village . . . probably the laziest in the world. Men and women . . . were lounging about and in the houses, squatting in the dust, in absolute indolence, except that the women, all of them, were suckling their babies. . . . The men are more
cleanly than the women, in every respect in better condition.” Laziness and stupidity also spilled over into the care of children, and peasant women were often called “Egypt’s worst mothers.” Another account stipulated: “From that time forward [birth], mighty little care is taken of the young fellah—at least to all outward appearances. He is weaned as late as possible, but when he can walk, is left to toddle about all day among the poultry and the goats, as naked as when he received the doubtful blessing of life. He is never or rarely washed, and swarms of flies constantly settle about his eyes. . . . Great misery occasionally induces a mother to sell or expose her child.”

From Every Home a Government: Tyranny and the Shape of the Egyptian Home

The odd habits of the Egyptian male—fecklessness, laziness, the tendency to recline and to waste endless hours in the consumption of tea and coffee, love of gossip and character assassination—were attributed to the habits of women in the home. If there was something “lacking” in a man’s behavior or his character, it could be traced to the defects of his wife (or wives). But according to the nineteenth-century travelogue, the most deleterious effects of the harem and the hovel were not to be found on the streets or in coffeehouses. Rather, they manifested themselves at the level of government. As the century progressed, writers more frequently connected the condition of Egypt’s homes with that of its body politic: mothers were not only responsible for producing spoiled children but for raising generations of men who were unfit to rule.

Europeans described the pashas who governed Egypt as being given to fits of anger and injustice. Pre-nineteenth-century writers such as Coppin and Gonzales, however, were more interested in the system of justice that allowed such abuses to go unchecked than they were with its causes. Neither referred to despotism as the political manifestation of a degenerate society, nor did they implicate women in Egypt’s potential for misrule. In such an equation, despotism was the unfortunate byproduct of the system that produced it rather than the manifestation of its citizens’ defects.

The relationship between the shape of the government and Egyptians’ private lives began to be articulated in travel literature as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Accounts from that period, however, did not focus on women’s participation in the shaping of rulers. Charles Perry, for exam-
ple, who visited Egypt in 1743, attributed the alleged bad nature of the Ottoman government to the fact that Ottoman rulers were educated in the seraglio, from which they acquired their “negative” form of governing. Perry believed isolation, rather than “female influence,” produced the seraglio’s negative effects.60

The most striking antecedents to Victorian explanations of the relationship between the home and the political realm are found in a collection of letters written from Egypt in 1786 by Monsieur Savary to a cleric in Paris. Savary did not claim that women could ultimately influence the body politic; however, he did attribute the shaping of a society’s morals to women and called on women to play a “role” in society that would extend beyond the domicile. “Women play a brilliant role in Europe. There they reign on the world’s stage. Often the strength of nations is in their hands. What a difference there is in Egypt!! There, women are burdened by the shackles of slavery. Condemned to servitude, they have no influence on public affairs. Their empire consists only of the walls of their harem. It is there that their graces and their charms are weakened. Confined to the inner realm of the family, their activities don’t even include domestic occupations.”61 While Savary claimed never to have entered a harem, he was inclined to believe that its activities left women in a state of “slavery,” which confined their influence to a very limited realm.62

By the mid-nineteenth century, travelers routinely pointed to the home as the source of Egypt’s misrule. According to many travelers, it was women who taught Oriental men to become tyrants. In the harem, men learned to be “chef, juge et pontifie de la famille . . . il y commande.”63 Each family was said to form a small state in which the father was the “sovereign.” In the family, according to Savary, each member learned his or her roles and duties. Chief among those duties was submission to the authority of others, especially that of the father. Savary evoked images of little kingdoms, saying: “The oldest man holds the scepter in his hands.”64 He who held the scepter was allegedly accorded all respect.

Victorian writers had the tendency to attribute the rise of “real” despotism in Egypt to events that occurred there in the nineteenth century. The reign of Mohammad ‘Ali and the rise of his dynasty were consistently referred to as marking the beginnings of Egypt’s real degeneracy: “As the grand sheikhs of Cairo enjoy more influence and power under this species of government than any other, they support the existing system with all their means; the soldier tyrannizes, the people suffer; the great do not feel any evils, and the machine goes on as it can.”65
Nineteenth-century travelers claimed to “know” the nature of Mohammad ‘Ali and his descendants as the result of their alleged access to the domestic realm. One of the conventions of Victorian travel literature that appeared more and more frequently as the century progressed was that of the “conversation” between travelers and Egyptians, in which the most revealing information about Egypt came from its most private spaces. It was such a trope that frequently allowed for the exposure of the “real” nature of Mohammad ‘Ali’s rule: travelers could claim to “know all about him” through alleged dialogues with members of his harem or his inner circle of ministers. The following, for example, was taken from a “conversation” between Nassau William Senior and one such minister — Artin Pasha — in which Mohammad ‘Ali’s proclivities toward the despotic were confessed:

He told me that he had read much about Machiavelli’s “The Prince” and begged me to translate it for him. I set to work and gave him ten pages the first day, and the next day ten pages . . . but on the fourth day he stopped me. “I have read,” he said, “all that you have given me of Machiavelli. I did not find much that was new . . . the next ten pages were no better, and the last were common-place. I see clearly that I have nothing to learn from Machiavelli. I know many more tricks than he knew.”

Mixed with discussions of the overbearing despotic nature of the Egyptian khedive were descriptions of the Egyptian lower classes as being wholly childlike and completely subject to the whims of their tyrant “father”: “There is something, indeed there are many things, amusing in the first aspect of a barbarous population . . . but it soon becomes painful to live with beings with whom you cannot sympathize. The servility and degradation of the lower classes, the tyranny and insolence of the higher, and the rapacity and childishness of all, disgusted me more and more everyday. The government seemed, every day, to get worse and worse . . . because I saw more and more its workings.”

Egypt’s “aristocracy” was similarly “known” to the traveler. Senior called upon a member of the khedive’s inner circle (this time Tawfiq’s) to account for the “truth” about Egypt’s aristocracy and to illustrate the pressing need for reform of the ruling elite: “The Sheikhs and their families were the most ignorant, ragged and worthless aristocracy that ever had been. They would not work, they would not read; they passed their lives in smoking and contriving how to oppress the fellahs and deprive the government. . . . I shall return their sons in a year or two educated and civilized with more knowledge of men and things than they would have
acquired in ten years squatting before the gates of their villages in the sun.  

Central to such narratives about Egyptian men was the role of Egyptian women in producing them. According to Senior’s “conversations” with Egypt’s elite, the degeneracy of both the rulers and the ruled resulted from their upbringing. Having no contact with the outside world, exposed only to the wiles of women, receiving only a Qur’anic education from his father — the Egyptian male knew nothing but the bad habits of the harem. His fate was simply to repeat the sins of his parents, marrying and divorcing, smoking and gossiping, until old age ended his career:

At fifteen he marries a girl of 11 or 12, but seldom, unless his family is very rich, keeps house; he and his wife live with his father or with her mother. By the time that he is 30, his wife has become old; he divorces her and marries another, and at 40 may have had nine or ten wives, but seldom more than one at a time.

Long before he is 50, the charms of the harem are over, and his life becomes every year blanker and blanker. . . . He does not read or write; he has little pleasure in society, for Orientals converse little and, indeed, have little to converse about.

There are no diversion parties, or balls, or theatres in our cities. There are no politics to incite interest except the intrigues of the Diwan. . . . He smokes for five hours; he enjoys himself; that is, reposes on a divan for three hours without smoking, sleeping or thinking; he squats cross-legged for two more in a coffee-house, hearing stories which he already knows by heart, told by a professional, and gets through to the remaining eight and one-half hours in bed, or on his bed, for he seldom undresses. How are you going to regenerate a people when such are the habits of its aristocracy?

The answer to breaking the cycle of such presumed depravity and to instilling virtue in the ruling elite was the regeneration of Egypt’s women. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, travel literature increasingly called for women’s education and training such that Egyptian men might be rejuvenated. The reform of Egypt’s public realm was to start at home.

Every harem is a little despotism, in which the vices of despotism, its lawlessness, its cruelty, its intrigues, the pride and selfishness of its master, and the degradation of its subjects are reproduced on a smaller scale, but not with less intensity. Each wife is, of course, the envy of all the others. . . . The children . . . are trained up in the evil passions of family war, its stratagems, its falsehood, its spite and its revenge. . . . Early marriages give us mothers unfit to bring up their children. If polygamy degrades the wife, deprives the children, and turns the husband into
a tyrant, does not that mean that institution alone accounts for Musulman inferiority?\textsuperscript{70}

As nineteenth-century sojourners in Egypt began to raise their voices in defense of women’s position in society, and as they called for women’s reform and education as a panacea for the ills of public sphere in toto, travel literature traded in description for prescription. The aim of travel literature became not so much the chronicling of those things that Europeans thought they had found in Egypt, but, rather, the construction of a standard toward which Egypt might evolve. Egyptian women and the domestic realm were used as markers of Egypt’s progress or, conversely, its retardation. The reform of women came to symbolize the reform of the body politic. Thus the exposure of the harem and the hovel was not simply a means of knowing Egypt; it became the critical first step in changing it. The intrigue with which earlier travelers viewed Egypt and its “peculiar” institutions was replaced with descriptions of superior European institutions, ideologies, and lifestyles, and the travelogue became an arena through which armchair reform was carried out.\textsuperscript{71}

The Inner Realm on Display: Egypt at the 1867 Universal Exposition at Paris

During the second half of the nineteenth century, at precisely the same time that European interest in Egypt had grown most intense, Egypt’s interior spaces were frequently reproduced for the European public.\textsuperscript{72} At the Universal Exposition of 1867 in Paris, for example, the nation known as Egypt was represented through the display of three buildings, representing different eras of the country’s history. Visitors were instructed to go inside the displays in order to know Egypt, past and present. On display on the Champs de Mars—in order that “on se transporte en Égypte”—was a pharaonic temple; a Salamlik, or quarters of the (male) ruling elite, where official interactions took place; and an Okel, or caravansary.\textsuperscript{73} The exposition’s official literature called the temple and the Salamlik examples of “the two dead civilizations of the Pharaohs and the caliphs.”\textsuperscript{74} The Okel was presented as an example of Egypt under Isma‘il Pasha, who oversaw an era of economic and industrial boom.\textsuperscript{75} The guidebook that led visitors through the exhibits presented the contents of each building in extraordinary detail. No aspect of the buildings was left to the viewer’s imagination. Visitors were informed that each detail
had been scrupulously replicated, giving the display the utmost veracity. “The decoration—in general and in the minute details—the people and the things—all of it reproduces Egypt for us.”

In the temple, guests were enjoined to examine the magnificent construction, the precision with which the ancients immortalized their gods, the spectacular art, the vivid colors of the paints, the magnificent hieroglyphs. Likewise, in the Salamlik, visitors appreciated the detail, but this time they saw artifacts of the inner world of Egypt’s caliphs. Exquisite carpets, great quantities of gold and silver, weapons, furniture, silks, teas, spices—all were displayed in order to expose the mysteries of the quarters in which Egyptian rulers planned battles, wrote treaties, bargained over the spoils of war. In the inner world of the Salamlik, the past was recaptured.

The Okel was exposed in the greatest detail, as it was said to represent living Egypt. Step by step, floor by floor, brick by brick, the building’s interior was revealed, and guests were lead through living quarters, commercial centers, military quarters, and stables for camels and donkeys. In addition, there was a reconstruction of an Egyptian library and a mosque school. The living quarters of the Okel commanded the most attention. One entered “by a wooden staircase, of several landings and a rather plain casing, which leads to the first floor and to the terrace where it ends, we are told, at a lanternon made entirely of mashrabiyya. Let’s leave it in order to visit the big room. . . . The mashrabiyyas are worth seeing up close, and they are the most interesting part of our construction. They were taken from Hussein Bey’s house in Cairo.” Visitors were asked to enjoy the vast quantity of objects that had been arranged in the Okel, many of which, it was claimed, were brought directly from Egypt, and to admire the great precision with which they had been laid out.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of “Egypt” as it was “reproduced” at the exposition lay not so much in the fact that the nation’s interior space was opened up for public enjoyment or for the general acquisition of knowledge about Egypt. Rather, it lay in the challenge with which visitors were presented as part of their tour. In the words of the official guide, they were asked to use their knowledge of Egypt’s past in order to decide, to ordain, what the nation’s future should be. “Today the exhibit offers to the admiring eyes of the whole world, in miniature and in one small site, all of Egypt, brilliant and splendid Egypt, revealing the grandeurs of its past, the rich promises of its present, and leaving to public opinion the task of drawing conclusions about its future.” A tour through Egypt’s inner realms, past and present, ensured a vision of the future and gave Europeans the power to decide Egypt’s fate.
Egyptian households, their interiors, and their customs were central to the construction of knowledge about Egypt in the nineteenth century. The Egyptian landscape that was created by tourist adventures and scholarly peregrinations was, to a great extent, shaped and structured by the harem and the hovel, spaces that were, ironically, largely hidden from the traveler’s view. Women and their domestic activities were crucial to the West’s understanding of Egypt and from whence its political and economic difficulties stemmed. Rather than asking why an obsession with Egypt’s women accompanied the construction of “the Egypt question,” we might begin to ask how “the Egypt question” could possibly have been constructed without them.

But Europe’s obsession with Egypt’s private realm and the subsequent attaching of the domestic realm to political and economic activities did more than simply conflate women and struggles that took place in the public realm. The relentless pursuit of “inner” Egypt and the uncovering of “secrets” that accompanied it resulted in the construction of two paradigms in which Egypt’s progress or lack of it were to be measured. The first, which was the result of the equation made between modern motherhood and political success, pitted the habits and customs of Egyptians against those of the British in a race toward modernity. Proof that Egypt was not modern and, therefore, incapable of governing itself lay as much in the shape of relations between men and their wives as it did in the shape and function of its political institutions. Until its connubial relations were reformed, Egypt could not inch closer to modernity.

At the same time, the nineteenth-century construction of the pharaonic past and the juxtaposition of the great achievements of the ancient Egyptians with the chaos and disorder of the present also served to highlight modern Egypt’s backward state. In such a construction, Egyptians had not only failed to “make it” to modernity, as it was defined by the Europeans, but it had “slipped” from their previous days of glory. Having thus suspended Egypt in time, between a golden past and a modernity that they could not yet grasp, the British called for an open-ended period of reform.79

The use of the essential, inner realm to define Egypt also created a kind of “subjectivity” from which the Egyptian was expected to speak. The role and position of women, the habits and activities of the home, formed the discourse of modern Egyptian-ness. Women were central to dialogue between Egyptians and Europeans about modernity and its trappings, not only because the early years of the occupation left discussions about the political realm outside of their grasp, but because the very definitions
of “what to do about Egypt” necessitated that women be evoked in every “modern” utterance.

Finally, the above discussion of Egypt as it was shaped by tourism and travelogues challenges the most common notions about the relationship between knowledge about “the other” and the creation of colonial policy: “We came, we saw, we were horrified, we intervened.” While Britain’s policy in Egypt was to a large extent shaped by the officials who interacted with the Egyptian ruling elite, it is easy to argue that Isma’il’s antics had been “known” to the British government long before he was forced to abdicate. “The Egypt question” was thus not the product of the “horror” experienced by European banks and governments when Isma’il’s accounts were perused and the “truth” discovered. Cromer and his associates may have been horrified by what they “saw” in the most private spaces of the palace and the harem, but they did not discover or uncover it. Such horrors had long since been unmasked through popular literature. Thus, the basic narrative about Egypt’s invasion and occupation must be rewritten to include what it was that the British knew about Egypt prior to the occupation, what it was that horrified them, and how the policies of intervention and occupation were therefore configured.
Among the many foreigners present in Egypt at the time of the British occupation was English nobleman Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840–1922). Blunt was a curious figure among the expatriate community. On the one hand, he was a tourist searching for an escape from England’s climate and hoping to add to his stock of Arabian horses. On the other hand, his interest in learning the Arabic language brought him into increased contact with Egyptians outside of tourist circles. Among them were al-Azharites Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) and Mohammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905). Through his interactions with these men, Blunt’s interests in Egypt and Arabic were transformed into an unofficial involvement in Egyptian politics. Blunt supported al-Afghani and ‘Abduh’s brand of Islamic modernism and nationalism and did his utmost to arrange audiences for them with other sympathetic Westerners in Europe and Egypt. In both Cairo and London he petitioned for British withdrawal from Ireland and Egypt. Blunt’s concern about European encroachment into Islam mirrored his long-standing support of the Irish national movement, and he earnestly attempted to convince Her Majesty’s Government that an extended occupation of Egypt would not serve the crown’s interests.

Blunt was the first British witness to the occupation to publish his memoirs about his experiences in Egypt. Whether this particular accomplishment was the result of his haste to circulate his views about the occupation or a by-product of his relative life of leisure is unclear. The title of his memoirs, however, Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt, does suggest that Blunt had an agenda, as does the following quote from...
the original manuscript, published in 1895. Blunt wrote: “It is not always in official documents that the truest facts of history are to be read, and certainly in the case of Egypt, where intrigue of all kinds has been so rife, the sincere student needs help to understand the published parliamentary papers.”

Blunt’s hunch that official documents about the occupation did not expose a full account of British motives in 1882, or of the British understanding of the country and the people they invaded, is easily confirmed through close readings of dispatches to and from the Foreign Office and the memoirs of the officials who oversaw the British protectorate. While Egypt’s heavy debt to European bondholders and the British desire to safeguard their trade routes—aspects of the occupation that are clearly recorded in parliamentary papers—were certainly crucial factors behind the occupation, other official documents and private memoirs reveal that discussions of Egypt and “the Egypt question” included debates about Egypt and the Egyptians that transcended concerns with land and money. Those discussions included images that bore a great resemblance to travel literature and art. They cast the homes and families of elite Egyptians as central to understanding Egyptian politics.

Blunt’s call to read between the lines of official records reveals that there were motives behind the occupation that, while not necessarily “secret,” were as essential to the occupation as were the Suez Canal and Egypt’s increasingly tenuous ability to pacify its stockholders. The critique of the additional agendas behind the occupation and the images associated with them is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the further illustration of the relationship between European image and Egyptian reality that was discussed in chapters 1 and 2. At the same time, however, traditional accounts of the financial and territorial motives behind the occupation fail to answer many lingering questions about why the occupation took place and how the subsequent protectorate was structured: Why did the British choose to take on another “colony” despite the anti-imperialist climate in Great Britain? Why did they choose an open-ended tenure in Egypt? Why were the colonial elite so determined to reform a country in which they claimed to have found evidence of economic solvency and self-governing institutions? Blunt was correct in suggesting that answers to such questions lie in literature not normally included in official records.

Official documents and memoirs were as laden with images of corrupt Egyptians and family practices as was the travel literature that was written before and during the occupation. While the British did not overtly
state that they were occupying Egypt because of the sexual practices of the khedives and of the ruling classes, they do imply that they had to stay in Egypt because — and despite compelling evidence to the contrary — something was wrong with Egyptians that made them incapable of governing themselves. Those deficiencies were often linked to the moral condition of male Egyptians, a condition that was also linked to their familial and sexual practices. Just as the family and its politics were central to the literary construction of an Egyptian landscape, familial politics appeared as a central ingredient in the construction of the “veiled” protectorate.

Invasion and Occupation

The British occupation of Egypt and the official commencement of Anglo-Egyptian rule began early in the summer of 1882. The British allegedly reacted to the wave of antiforeign sentiment that characterized Egypt’s political climate in the early 1880s and that appeared to threaten British foreign trade. In response to an outbreak of rioting targeted at Europeans in the harbor city of Alexandria earlier that summer, the British fleet landed troops off Egypt’s northern coast in order to quell the riots and restore order.

Between June and September 1882, a number of battles took place, in Alexandria and elsewhere, between the British, who had both territorial and economic interests in maintaining order in Egypt, and Egyptians who wished to put an end to foreign influence in their political and economic affairs. The Egyptians who participated in the rebellion rallied under the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians” and in support of Ahmed ‘Urabi, who proposed the creation of a constitutional regime. ‘Urabi and his supporters — native Egyptian army officers and landed, commercial, and administrative elites — were the product of reform programs begun by Mohammad ‘Ali and continued and expanded by Isma’il. The Egyptian army officers wanted parity with their Turkish and Circassian counterparts within the military ranks. Many elected members of the Chamber of Deputies, opened by Isma’il in 1866, wanted their role within the government to be less consultative and more executive. Arabophone-Egyptian landowning elites and professional graduates from the state’s schools — the effendiyya — hoped to ascend to greater heights within the central administration, thereby taking a greater hand in the running of the state. Between 1858 and 1882 Arabophone Egyptians had a near monop-
oly on high positions within both the military and the civilian administrations but still felt excluded from certain posts. 

The goal of the “Egypt for the Egyptians” movement that united all of them was the curtailment of the khedive’s powers and the limiting of European encroachment into Egyptian affairs, both of which were seen by the Egyptians as blocking their access to power. While the ‘Urabists were successful in taking control of Cairo in July of 1882, forcing the Khedive to take refuge in Alexandria, the British invasion that began in mid-July limited the ‘Urabists’ control to Cairo by early August. By September 19, 1882, the British forces were successful in defeating ‘Urabi and his followers, and the British colonial experience in Egypt began. While the invasion of Egypt was, on the surface, designed only to put down the rebellion, protect European nationals, restore public order, and bolster the power of Tawfiq, the British did not leave Egypt until 1952.

The 1882 invasion came six years after the country had witnessed a financial crisis. Egypt was in debt, and, in accordance with a joint agreement that had been drawn up between Isma‘il and certain European financial houses and their governments, a Public Debt Commission had been established in 1876. The purpose of the commission was to oversee the repayment of the loans contracted by Egypt’s rulers, past and present, and to maintain khedival authority and public order intact.

Isma‘il had managed to increase Egypt’s foreign debt from 3.3 million to 98.5 million Egyptian pounds, money he used to implement a series of urban and agrarian reforms. European observers claimed that, despite his talents for modernization, Isma‘il was fond of extravagant spending and that he had an insatiable appetite for all things European. According to Viscount Alfred Milner (1854–1925), private secretary to the banker G. J. Goschen (1831–1907), whose investigations into Egypt’s finances in the 1860s led to the establishment of the commission, Isma‘il was “luxurious, voluptuous, ambitious, fond of display . . . he was, at the same time, full of the most magnificent schemes for the material improvement of the country.” In his haste to transform Cairo into a second Paris (Isma‘il considered Egypt to be a European, rather than an African, nation), the khedive spent vast sums. By 1876, he had spent much and repaid little, causing his creditors to doubt his ability to repay at all.

In the early 1870s Isma‘il attempted to remedy this precarious financial situation by restructuring loans and increasing the production of certain cash crops, particularly cotton. In 1871, he promulgated the Muqabala Law, through which landowners got a perpetual reduction on their taxes in exchange for paying six years’ worth of taxes up front. Because land-
owners were slow to show enthusiasm, the law was made compulsory in 1874. Additionally, Isma‘il sold off parts of his estates as well as those of his family members. In 1875, the Khedive sold Egypt’s shares in the Suez Canal Company to Great Britain, handing over a prodigious stake in, as well as control over, Egypt’s maritime economy. The results of Isma‘il’s attempts, however, were apparently so meager in the face of such enormous debt that, in 1876, in a move designed to delay repayment indefinitely, Isma‘il declared bankruptcy, sending his European creditors into a panic.

The formation of a Public Debt Commission was the result of that panic. Isma‘il agreed to the commission’s formation in an attempt to regain financial solvency; in actuality, however, its creation was Egypt’s first step toward the loss of political independence. The consequent increase of European intervention in Egypt’s financial affairs led, less than a decade later, to the ‘Urabi rebellion and gave meaning to the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians.” The commission consisted of four representatives from European creditor nations as well as two controllers, one French and one British, and was designed as a system of dual control for France and Great Britain, both of which had accumulated economic and territorial interests in Egypt. As the system was configured, the khedive and his ministerial entourage would continue to rule Egypt, but they would do so under the supervision and tutelage of a group of foreign administrators who would oversee the Egyptian economy. These outsiders would also manage Egyptian affairs d’état, such that the capital loaned to the royal family made its way back to Europe. The architects of this scheme argued that keeping a khedive on the throne with all of his authority intact would ensure public order and facilitate the tasks facing the commission. Solvency could thus be achieved without a revolution.

By the time of the occupation, the number of Europeans residing in Egypt had reached ninety thousand, up from sixty-eight thousand in 1870 and from the six thousand expatriates who resided there in 1840. The modernization projects of the khedives attracted Europeans to Egypt, where they were often granted concessions for development projects such as that given to Ferdinand de Lesseps for the construction of the Suez Canal. Others profited from the state’s use of their technical skills. In the 1860s and 1870s in particular, Europeans were employed in the Suez Canal project, the expansion of Egypt’s railway system, and in many of Isma‘il’s urban modernization projects. The cotton boom in the 1860s and Egypt’s increased trade with Europe led to the growth of Egypt’s foreign commercial community, which tended to be located in ports such as
Alexandria and Port Said as well as the capital. The size of this community grew along with Isma'il's mounting debt. Finally, the size of the British community tripled as the result of the occupation. The long-standing Ottoman tradition of granting capitulations to expatriates in their territories placed Europeans above Egyptian law. Life in Egypt thus held considerable allure: Europeans found in Egypt a heady atmosphere of reform and economic growth in which they could live cheaply, invest freely, and enjoy the many supposed adventures of the Orient.

Life in Egypt also allowed Europeans increasing power. As the khedives borrowed European money and expertise, they found their own power circumscribed by “concessionaries, contractors and bankers [who] exploited their position to create a vast field of opportunities for their own profit.” Additionally, foreign consular offices used the power vested in them by the capitulations to obtain useful contacts within the administration and to protect European merchants from complaints bought against them by Egyptians.

The reaction of elite Egyptians to the growing size and power of the European community was mixed. Elite Egyptians, too, were profiting from increased trade with Europe and from the modernization of their country. Outward signs of success for Egypt’s upper classes included access to Western education, imported European goods, and holidays in Europe. But just as certain Cairene neighborhoods became exclusively European and new sporting and cultural clubs extended membership privileges to Europeans alone, the presence of the commission and the creation of a mixed cabinet was a signal to the Egyptian elite that their aspirations were threatened by their ruler and by the West alike.

The creation of a cabinet staffed by European ministers angered Egyptian notables and higher-ranking members of the army and the central administration who had come to expect a role in running Egypt’s affairs. The cabinet formed under Prime Minister Nubar (1825–99) in 1878 in response to the founding of the Debt Commission was in fact the first executive cabinet in Egyptian history. But neither the khedive nor the Egyptians who served on it were happy with its formation because of the role that Europeans played in it. Indeed, Nubar’s mixed ministry reflected a turning point in Egyptian history: Until that time Egypt had been governed directly by Isma'il, who was aided by notables and state-trained administrators who headed and staffed administrative departments. The presence of Europeans on the cabinet not only diminished Isma'il’s authority but increased the importance of Isma’il’s prime minister by making him a liaison between the khedive and the European cabinet members.
In addition to increasing the level of Egyptians’ resentment toward Europeans, the establishment of the Public Debt Commission led to the rise of secret, political societies in Egypt. The formation and proliferation of the societies were encouraged by Isma’il because their members seemed to be as angered by European intervention in politics as they were with the khedive’s role in exposing Egypt to such a level of Western interference. Certain prominent members of the Chamber of Deputies met in members’ homes to form the National Society, which by March 1879 demanded the formation of a national government that would exclude Europeans. Members of the National Society drew up a National Project of Reform (La’iha wataniyya), which recommended, among other things, that Egyptians themselves could solve Egypt’s financial crisis, that dual control should be limited to financial affairs, and that the chamber must be granted greater control over politics. The demands of the National Society were similar to those of the ‘Urabists within the military.12

The platforms of the ‘Urabists and the National Society reflected frustration with Isma’il’s heavy-handed rule and with European influence in Egypt. But they also indicate a determination on the part of Arabophone Egyptians that they should not be blocked from the highest echelons of the civilian and military administrations. In April 1879, Isma’il formed a new cabinet with Sherif Pasha, leader of the National Society, at its head. The khedive stated that he wished to comply with the interests of the nation, and a draft of a constitution was submitted to the Chamber of Deputies for discussion. Some members of the military remained unsatisfied with Isma’il’s gestures. The appointment of an increasing number of Britons to military positions and serious arrears in back pay to Egyptian officers made their satisfaction unlikely. But Isma’il had succeeded in putting together what looked like an alliance between himself, his prime minister, and the Chamber of Deputies.

Great Britain and France were uneasy with the alliance and with the Egyptians’ apparent determination to withstand further European interference in their affairs. When on April 22, 1879, Isma’il decreed a financial arrangement that was contrary to what European nations wanted or expected, Germany took the lead in courting Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1908) to encourage Isma’il to abdicate his throne. Abdulhamid was struggling to salvage a disintegrating empire and was only too happy to get rid of an ambitious member of the dynasty that had tried to cut itself off from Ottoman rule entirely since the turn of the nineteenth century. On June 26, 1879, the sultan ordered the deposition of Isma’il and the ascension of his son Tawfiq to Egypt’s throne. Isma’il left Egypt to live
in exile in Naples and, later, Istanbul, where he died in 1895. Tawfiq ruled Egypt until 1892.

Tawfiq appeased European political and financial figures, who found him more compliant and more suitable a ruler than his father had been. To Egyptian nationalists, however, he was a weak and easily manipulated puppet. By 1880, Tawfiq had set up a procedure for the repayment of Egypt’s loans such that 60 percent of the state’s expenditures went to Europe at the expense of further investment at home. Nationalists thus saw Tawfiq’s ascension as marking the end of a period of relative autonomy and prosperity and the death knell of Egyptian self-rule.

For the British, keeping Tawfiq on the throne was crucial for a number of reasons. They equated a strong, stable khedival presence with the successful safeguarding of their economic and territorial interests; in actions and in character, Tawfiq appeared to be less likely than his father to resist the designs and demands of a foreign administration. At the same time, the British saw in the new khedive certain tendencies towards constitutional, liberal rule and deemed him more likely than his father to succeed at “modern” politics. Because of such proclivities, the British believed that real economic and political reform, without which Egypt could never stand as a modern, independent nation, could begin under Tawfiq’s rule.

By the early 1880s, the security of Egypt was of tremendous importance to certain European nations. Since the landing of Napoleon’s troops in Egypt in 1798, the country had been of both real and presumed importance to both Great Britain and France. For Great Britain, Egypt provided the surest and quickest access to India. For France, containing Britain’s territorial ambitions was of paramount significance. The construction of the Suez Canal not only tied up a considerable amount of French and British capital but increased both parties’ territorial ambitions in North Africa.

Upon taking power in 1879, Tawfiq set about building a stable government by inviting Sherif to form a new ministry. Sherif would only agree if Tawfiq would promulgate a constitution. Thus, in September 1879, the khedive chose Riad Pasha, known to be against constitutional reform, to serve as his prime minister and to form a new ministry. While Riad oversaw the implementation of certain policies that were pleasing to some Egyptians, such as tax reform measures and the abolition of corvée labor, he was forced to agree to the formation of an international commission that led to greater European control over Egypt’s finances. Such agreements, in addition to Riad and the khedive’s absolutist approach to
governing, led to further resistance from army officers, landowners, and government officials.

On November 4, 1880, certain members of the Chamber of Deputies joined forces with anti-khedive army officers to issue a manifesto demanding further autonomy for Egypt. It also called for greater control over the khedive—in other words, a constitution. Between November 1880 and the outbreak of the ‘Urabi-led rebellions of June 1882, Tawfiq was thus locked in a power struggle with the military and the Chamber of Deputies. By the time of the uprisings, those who positioned themselves against Tawfiq had learned that they could, in fact, force the khedive’s hand on certain issues. They succeeded, for example, in getting “their men” placed in important governmental positions. At the same time, those same forces witnessed the khedive’s ability to crack down on them when necessary through decrees limiting such things as the length of military service and the arrest of dissenters. This standoff appeared on the verge of resolving itself in late December 1881, when the tone of Tawfiq’s address to open the Chamber of Deputies reflected a mood of collaboration. But when a joint note from Great Britain and France promising support for the khedive arrived in early January 1882, the situation changed. The ‘Urabists were convinced that the European powers planned to step up their intervention into Egyptian affairs. Lacking any other source of support, members of the Chamber of Deputies moved in the direction of an alliance with the ‘Urabists. Both groups were now united in favor of a constitution and against furthered European involvement in their affairs.

Tawfiq was forced to dismiss his prime minister and appoint the ‘Urabist candidate Mahmud Sami al-Barudi (1839–1904) in February 1882. ‘Urabi then immediately set about bringing the Chamber of Deputies under his own control. He also made the changes within the military that he thought had been needed for years, helping Arabophone Egyptians achieve better status and pay. ‘Urabi forced al-Barudi to dismiss European officials from the government, presaging the removal of all European influence from Egypt. To many Egyptians of all classes, ‘Urabi looked like the hero who might finally rid Egypt of Christian, European influence.

When in early June of 1882 an atmosphere of triumph against the West turned into antiforeign demonstrations in Alexandria, ‘Urabi’s forces were either unwilling or unable to contain the violence. This brought the attention of French and British troops off the Alexandria coast. ‘Urabi’s forces prepared a military confrontation against them, speculating that the
Sultan would come to his assistance. Great Britain demanded of the Sultan that ‘Urabi be dismissed; the Sultan wavered but refused to send troops to Egypt. By July, the khedive had taken refuge in Alexandria, and the ‘Urabists continued to build up their political and military power. When the ‘Urabists refused to give in to British ultimatums to cease building defenses along the Mediterranean coastline, the British prepared to attack. When England made it clear that an attack was forthcoming, the French withdrew their forces. The battles that led to the British occupation began on July 11, 1882, culminating in the September occupation.

British policy began to be shaped officially in the fall of 1882 with the arrival in Egypt of Lord Dufferin (1866–1918), British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte at Istanbul and Her Majesty’s Envoy Extraordinaire. His task was to investigate Egypt and submit a report about its political condition to London. In this account, Dufferin spelled out the potential difficulties that the British might encounter in their attempts to quell the anarchy and chaos of the ‘Urabi rebellion. His suggestions served as a basic outline for British rule; Dufferin persuaded the British government that withdrawal needed to be preceded by a reform of the Egyptian administration. Such reform would ensure the stability of the Egyptian polity as well as its economy and limit the duration of an occupation. Dufferin wrote: “Europe and the Egyptian people, whom we have undertaken to rescue from anarchy, have alike a right to require that our intervention should be beneficent and its results enduring; that it should obviate all danger of future perturbations, and that it should leave established on sure foundations the principles of justice, liberty and public happiness.”14

Lord Cromer was dispatched to Egypt in late summer 1883 to oversee the establishment of a British administration in Egypt that would strengthen Egyptian governing institutions and assure that Dufferin’s goals were attained. As consul general, Cromer laid the foundations for an administrative structure in Egypt that lasted through the first decade of the twentieth century. Cromer implemented a system of administration that was designed to oversee and “tutor” the different ministries of the Egyptian government. Dufferin recommended that the Egyptians have village and provincial councils as well as a general assembly and a legislative council, members of which would be elected by the provinces and the villages. Eight ministers would be responsible to the khedive. While in theory foreign administrators were supposed to yield to the power of the khedive, his ministers, and the assemblies, in fact the British exercised enormous power and influence over them. Foreign Secretary Lord Granville (1818–91), in what later came to be known as the Granville Doc-
trine, recommended that the Egyptian ministers be advised that they would cease to hold their offices were they not to follow the advice of their British overlords.\textsuperscript{15}

Granville’s advice led to a pattern of rule that Milner later described as a “veiled protectorate,” the length and goals of which were as uncertain as they were indefinite. The Dufferin Report and the Granville Doctrine both suggested that Egypt possessed centralized authority, a liberal economy, and forms of representative government, the hallmarks of European nation-states.\textsuperscript{16} British Agent Edward Malet openly referred to Egypt’s political system as constitutional.\textsuperscript{17} At the same time, however, both documents belied British confidence in the Egyptian ability to participate in the institutions that would eventually be handed over to them.\textsuperscript{18}

The tenets of the protectorate thus depicted Egypt as being both politically sound and unstable, modern and less than modern (Milner wrote that no country on earth could vie with Egypt in such idiosyncrasies).\textsuperscript{19} Concomitantly, the vague goals of the protectorate and its open-ended duration placed the British in the position of being at the same time committed to reforming and governing Egypt and hurrying to take their exit. “The question,” Milner wrote, “is often asked why, if we do not intend to keep the country, we should be at such pains to improve it?”\textsuperscript{20} The ambiguities of the protectorate were multiple.

1882: An Uncertain Occupation

Why did the British expose themselves to a potentially lengthy involvement in Egypt despite the less-than-enthusiastic atmosphere for reform at home? Scholars typically attribute Egypt’s official entrance into the British colonial orbit to decreased British confidence in the willingness of Egypt’s leaders to participate in a European-dominated foreign trade or foreign rule. Territorial reasons can also be cited: As early as the 1870s, some Britons argued for an invasion of Egypt out of fear that Britain would lose its coveted routes to India. Intense debates occurred in parliament and in the press over whether or not the British could trust that these routes were actually safe in the hands of Isma’il.\textsuperscript{21} Once the occupation had taken place, it was also commonly argued that the interests of bondholders in Egypt had, in fact, led to the invasion. A new kind of imperialism was taking place as the result of overseas investment.\textsuperscript{22} Surplus capital, some argued, and its investment outside of Europe had led to the right kind and degree of jingoism necessary for the launching
of a burdensome invasion. Finally, certain Britons believed that England had a duty to occupy Egypt because of Great Britain’s special aptitude for “governing or directing more backward nations.”

Since 1961, with the publication of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher’s *Africa and the Victorians*, the British government’s willingness to occupy Egypt has been most frequently attributed to “freakish events” such as the ‘Urabi rebellion that threatened Great Britain’s overseas trade. According to the Robinson and Gallagher thesis, the invasion of Egypt was proof that the Palmerstonian policies of informal empire had failed. British policy in the Near East from 1840 to 1880 was based on an imperialism of free trade, or informal empire, designed to create a local class of merchants and traders who, as a result of increased prosperity, would adopt the politics of liberalism. These locals would become grateful to the British for advancing free trade and thus welcome further tutelage from them. A sympathetic local population would ensure political stability and the easy maintenance of British supremacy. According to Robinson and Gallagher, the ‘Urabi rebellion and its aftermath served as significant proof to the British government that indirect European influence was in fact doing more harm than good. Chaos at the periphery of the empire — such as the ‘Urabi rebellion — drew the British into an occupation they did not want or need. The policies of Palmerston’s informal empire were hence transformed into the reluctant imperialism of an invasion.

Critics are skeptical of Robinson and Gallagher’s analysis. Juan Cole’s analysis of the events leading up to the ‘Urabi rebellion, for example, suggested that Robinson and Gallagher were wrong, empirically and conceptually, in finding anarchy and impending collapse in the Middle East. Cole claimed that Robinson and Gallagher’s views of social change in nineteenth-century Egypt — particularly their depiction of a putative clash between conservative, “Moslem” tendencies and a new, liberal stratum as well as their notion of fragility of Ottoman institutions — distorted the reality of the ‘Urabi rebellion and its supporters. He claimed that the Robinson and Gallagher thesis also distorts the causes of the occupation and British policy and intentions in Egypt.

Likewise, in his reassessment of Robinson and Gallagher’s *Africa and the Victorians*, A. G. Hopkins suggested that the Conservative government that ruled Britain from 1874 to 1880 was not as hesitant about the occupation as Robinson and Gallagher suggested. Hopkins particularly cited Benjamin Disraeli’s (1804–81) purchase of Isma’il’s shares of the Suez Canal bonds in 1875 as giving the British government a direct investment in Egypt and, along with it, a greater interest in seeing Isma’il
keep his word. Hopkins suggested that Disraeli’s acquisition of the canal shares blurred distinctions between neutrality and commitment.

When the Liberals took power in 1880, William Gladstone’s policy of free trade imperialism was the minority opinion to full-scale occupation of Egypt. Hopkins pointed to Sir Charles Dilke (1843–1911), under-secretary of the Foreign Office, as emblematic of a general “casting about for ways of substituting British supremacy for Dual Control.” When the French took Tunisia in 1881, many considered Egypt to be a concession for Great Britain. On the eve of the ‘Urabi rebellion, in other words, the metropole was already poised to solve the Egypt problem with an occupation.

Differences in interpretation notwithstanding, the impetus for the invasion was a perceived crisis as well as an unwillingness on the part of the British to upset any balance of power relative to other European nations. Despite the variety of arguments for and against an invasion, a resounding chorus called for action in the face of the potential loss of access to Egypt and therefore to other parts of the British Empire. Indeed, journalist Edward Dicey’s (1832–1911) impassioned assertion that the British route to India could not be guaranteed by an unjust and incompetent khedive did not differ much from Dilke’s conviction that Isma’il and the ‘Urabi movement posed sufficient threats to convince parliament, as well as popular opinion, that an occupation was not only justifiable but an outright duty. Calls for the occupation were made in a language that cast Egypt and its political and economic institutions as threatening and unstable.

Justifying an Extended Stay in Egypt

Once the occupation of Egypt had become a fait accompli, however, little accord existed over what to do with it. The Gladstone government was reluctant to keep Egypt; British officials in the field hesitated to predict how long it would take to secure the country. What resulted was a kind of “policy of ambiguous policy,” through which a decision to either stay in Egypt or leave it could be legitimated. Such a plan was not deliberate but was, rather, Cromer’s response to his perceived predicament. He wrote: “I came to Egypt with a hearty desire to aid to the best of my ability the successful execution of Mr. Gladstone’s Egyptian policy. I thought I understood that policy and, if I understood it rightly, I felt assured that it met with my general concurrence. I soon found, however, that I was pursuing a phantom which constantly eluded my grasp.”
Gladstone’s determination to leave Egypt and Cromer’s reluctance to confirm the possibility of a quick withdrawal resulted in numerous investigations by British officials into Egyptian institutions and ideologies. To be sure, Egypt had been studied before: The G. J. Goschen and Stephen Cave missions of the 1860s and 1870s had been designed to investigate Egypt and its government and to articulate a strategy for recovery. Goschen and Cave’s inquiries were responsible for the creation of the Public Debt Commission that was set up to monitor the Egyptian government until it began successfully to pay back its loans. But while the reports issued by Goschen and Cave appear to have been based on actual investigations into Isma’il’s financial affairs and on inquiries into records of his transactions with European banks, the investigations preceding and accompanying the occupation of 1882 reveal a mixture of inquiry and fantasy. As officials like Dufferin and Granville began their investigations, they challenged the notion that Gladstone’s policy constituted a quick invasion followed by a quicker withdrawal. In a dispatch to Gladstone written shortly after the occupation, Granville noted: “Indeed, from the first moment when we began to look around in the country which we had rescued from anarchy, it was clearly seen to be wanting in all the conditions of independent life.”

Neither Dufferin nor Granville was ever clear about the source of their discoveries. Blunt criticized Dufferin’s investigations into Egyptian institutions, accusing him of simply throwing open the doors of his “embassy to anyone who could give information.” Dufferin claimed that his conclusions about Egypt were based on information “thoroughly threshed out by those with whom it has been my duty to put myself into communication.”

Gladstone wanted Dufferin to gather information about the potential reform of Egypt’s military and its political institutions, since the idea of a rapid reform program supported Gladstone’s desire to leave Egypt quickly. Granville and Dufferin were thus charged with assessing both Egypt’s political realm and its military, a task that proved overwhelming given the paucity of information about Egypt that the Gladstone government possessed prior to the occupation. Dufferin responded to Gladstone’s requests after only ten days in Egypt, stating that the establishment of liberal governing institutions in Egypt would be “more or less a leap in the dark.”

The reasons behind Dufferin’s conclusion are markedly unclear. Dufferin’s predecessor Cave had once concluded that Isma’il’s resources (if properly managed) were sufficient to meet Egypt’s liabilities. Malet, Egypt’s consul general from 1879 to 1883, later informed the Foreign
Office that Egyptian rule was, in fact, constitutional. Dufferin himself indicated that Egypt possessed what he called a Chamber of Notables that had “exhibited both wisdom and courage” (although it was also his belief that the chamber was easily swayed by the will of the khedives). In the Egyptian military, Dufferin saw evidence of order and loyalty. In other words, Dufferin’s report to the Foreign Office contains evidence of Egypt’s potential for self-government. Dufferin in fact enjoined Her Majesty’s Government to administer the “Valley of the Nile” through “the creation, within certain prudent limits, of representative institutions, of municipal and communal government . . . though aided . . . by sympathetic advice and assistance.” In the same paragraphs within which he alluded to Egypt’s potential, however, he concluded, “A certain quality which can best be expressed by the term ‘childishness’ seems to characterize the Egyptian people; and that they can proceed at once to exercise full-blown constitutional functions, which occasionally come to a deadlock in highly organised communities, is not to be expected.” Egyptians thus appear both capable of governing themselves and childlike.

The rhetoric of Dufferin’s correspondence with the Foreign Office — correspondence that would certainly be labeled “official” — often reads like travel literature. In writing his reports, Dufferin seemed to rely on hearsay and stories about Egyptian heritage rather than actual encounters with Egyptian elites and the institutions within which they functioned. In the fashion of nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse, Dufferin apparently had no qualms mixing real investigations into Egyptian institutions with hearsay and fantasy: Straightforward assessments of Egyptian institutions were juxtaposed with unsubstantiated descriptions of allegedly barbaric governing practices. On one occasion he reported objectively to Granville: “A Chamber of Deputies has actively existed . . . with this in view I think we should try to introduce the Representative Principle into the government of Egypt.” On another, Dufferin exclaimed, “My Lord, the most painful characteristic which strikes a traveller on visiting Egypt is the universal use of the ‘Courbash,’ or lash, administered with great severity on the most trivial occasions at the Caprice of petty officials.” Dufferin’s representations thus render Egyptian ministers both capable and wanting.

Cromer was equally forthright about attributing his knowledge of Egypt and the Egyptians to the travel accounts of his compatriots. What he understood about Isma’il and his character, for example, he had gleaned from Nassau William Senior’s Conversations and Journals in Egypt
and Malta (1882). In his memoirs, later to be published as *Modern Egypt*, Cromer wrote:

It should be remembered that Ismail was utterly uneducated. When Mr. Senior was returning to Europe in 1855, he found that an English coachman who had been in Ismail’s service, was his fellow-passenger. Of course, Mr. Senior at once interviewed him. The man’s account of Ismail’s private life is worth quoting. *I do not doubt its accuracy.*

“Ismail,” he [Senior] said, “and his brother Mustafa, when they were in Paris, used to buy whatever they saw; they were like children, nothing was fine enough for them; they bought carriages and horses like those of Queen Victoria or the Emperor, and let them spoil for want of shelter and cleaning. . . . The people he liked best to talk to were his servants, the lads who brought him his pipes and stood before him with their arms crossed. He sometimes sat on his sofa, and smoked, and talked to them for hours, all about women and such things. . . . I have known him sometimes to try to read a French novel, but he would be two hours getting through a page. Once or twice I saw him attempt to write. His letters were half an inch high, like those of a child’s copybook. I don’t think that he ever finished a sentence.” (Conversations, vol. 2, p. 228.)

In dispatches that often read more like nineteenth-century travel literature than “official” comment on finances and territories, assessment of the Egyptians’ capacity for self-government was couched in descriptions of institutions that, on the surface, seem to have had little to do with the ability of the Egyptian military and body politic to function. Dufferin’s and Cromer’s tendency to conflate travel literature with solid fact was emblematic of what Edward Said has called the “citationary nature of Orientalism”: the confidence Europeans felt about making claims about the Orient when those claims could be anchored in literature of any sort.

The most striking examples of the blurring of fact and fantasy to produce a vision of Egypt on the eve of the occupation were reports about the character of the khedives. In the early years of the British tenure in Egypt, for example, Cromer’s secretary, Henry Boyle, penned a “Memorandum on the Background of the Khedival Family.” The memorandum was intended to serve as a guidebook for British administrators in Egypt but was never printed or circulated. Boyle claimed that he wrote the book in order to show the mentality of the Egyptian royal family, such that administrators might understand the country over which they were governing. The text describes the character of many members of the royal family: Ibrahim was reported to have died from too much sex and champagne; all of Mohammad ‘Ali’s descendants—including Tawfiq—were listed as capricious and cruel; Tawfiq’s cousin, Princess Nazli, was
supposedly brilliant but besotted with champagne; and Tawfiq’s aunt Jamila, Boyle had concluded, was a lesbian who kept a chaotic, disorderly household.49

Boyle’s memorandum reveals a tendency on the part of the British to conflate the character and habits of the khedives with Egypt and its institutions in toto: “For all practical purposes, the Khedive and Egypt are identical.”50 Cromer and Dicey both compared Cromer with Louis XIV of France: “He, in his own person, was the state.”51 This link between character and politics was often used by the British to describe or even predict Egyptian politics. As Cromer wrote to the Foreign Office in 1882: “I have no reason to suppose that, should any disturbance occur . . . the Egyptian Government would be disposed to use excessive or unnecessary severity in its suppression. The personal character of the Khedive is, indeed, of itself almost a sufficient guarantee that no such tendency exists.”52 Dicey echoed Cromer’s predictions about Tawfiq’s potential response to domestic disturbances, saying that “by character, by disposition . . . Tewfik Pasha is very unlikely to imitate the example of his father.”53 To understand the character of the khedive, apparently, was to understand Egypt.

Despite the fact that Isma’il was out of power when the occupation took place, the characteristics of his rule and of his behavior seemed to be conflated with the inability of the Egyptian government to govern. Speaking of Tawfiq, his ministers, and the Egyptian army officers who had mutinied shortly after Tawfiq’s ascension in 1879, for example, Malet concluded: “The traditions of the days of Ismail Pasha stalked like spectres across their paths.”54 Isma’il and his character continued to symbolize political crisis and mismanagement.

Isma’il occupied a curious place in the minds of the Europeans who thought that they knew and understood him. To some Europeans, he had been a praiseworthy ruler. He had, in fact, created a modern military, laid one thousand miles of railroad track, dug fifty thousand miles of irrigation canals, and established hundreds of primary and secondary schools throughout Egypt. The Cairene upper classes spent their leisure time in well-landscaped parks and gardens, in museums and galleries, at the zoo, or visiting one of the world’s finest opera houses. Such accomplishments led many Europeans to consider Egypt a marvelous instance of progress. Others were not so convinced. In one of his many articles on Egypt in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*, for example, Dicey, claimed that such programs were in fact undermined by his perverted ambition. While Isma’il had been successful in transforming Egypt, Dicey stated his “mode of carrying out his objects” was “wholly unjustifiable” because of the “sen-
ual self-indulgence” that undergirded his private life. Europeans inside official banking and governing circles loved to tell stories about Isma’il and his peculiar behavior, stories that became commonplace European knowledge about Egypt. Wrote Cromer: “Ismail was too well known in Europe to play the part of the constitutional monarch.” One story, recorded by Boyle for his memorandum, illustrates what Europeans felt they knew about Isma’il and his rule: “Ismail was visiting Vienna . . . there he saw an enormous mirror which he wanted for his Abdine palace. He sent Bravay [a Frenchman and friend of Isma’il] to inquire the price, which was 20,000 francs. But in Bravay’s account the mirror was priced at 20,000 Napoleons [worth much more than the franc at that time], and no questions were asked.”

Tales of financial frivolity were coupled with stories about Isma’il’s penchant for savage, capricious rule. The most commonly told were those about his attempts, often successful, to kill off ministers with whom he disagreed. One of the most notorious tales was that of the khedive’s desire to kill his minister, Nubar, with whom he had become suddenly angry. Isma’il wanted to throw Nubar off the ship on which both men were traveling to Egypt from Istanbul. Nubar was only able to save his life by appealing to the vanities of the khedive: He tricked Isma’il into telling stories about himself until the ship landed in Alexandria, too late for Nubar’s execution to take place.

Lord Milner believed that the causes of the khedive’s bankruptcy were as much moral as financial. “The tremendous financial smash which marked the closing years of the reign of Ismail Pasha,” he wrote, “was the result of a disregard, not only of every economic, but every moral principle.” Milner later condemned Isma’il’s decadence: “Over and above the millions wasted in entertainments, in largess, in sensuality, in the erection of numerous palaces — structurally as rotten as they are aesthetically abominable — he threw away yet other millions upon a vast scheme of agricultural development.” He concluded that it was not merely the wild ups and downs of Egypt’s finances under Isma’il’s reign that indicated a need for European intervention but also the effects that Isma’il’s behavior had on the morality of Egypt’s citizens. Despite the exterior success of Isma’il’s reforms, his sensuality appears to have thus rendered him less capable than his Victorian contemporaries. Such descriptions of Isma’il’s character placed him in the position of being at once modern and backward, capable and incompetent. Dufferin and Granville did not condemn Isma’il’s reform programs simply for the accumulation of debt but for Isma’il’s putative lack of morality in carrying them out.
Stories circulated not only about Isma‘il’s immorality but about the disreputable origins of Tawfiq. A common tale was that Tawfiq “owed his exalted station to an accident. Isma‘il on one occasion visited a lavatory in the Palace and found there one of the minor slaves of the Harem—known as Kandilji—whose duty it was to look after the lighting of the Harem apartments. The girl attracted His Highness’s notice and in due course Tewfik saw the light of day. As he was Ismail’s eldest son, his mother became Birinji Kadin [the first lady] and Tewfik was heir to the throne.”

The sexual politics of Isma‘il’s mother, Khosayr Hanem, also figured prominently in the British project of characterizing and knowing Egypt. It was said that she was given to driving through Cairo in search of good looking men to take home to her palace. She allegedly had all of her young lovers executed after they spent the night in her boudoir. Whether these rumors were true or not, their circulation cemented the relationship between the private life of Egyptian elites and their political aptitude. As Victorian templates for connubial as well as parental behavior were assigned to the Egyptian body politic, the domestic habits of the khedives and their wives were not merely the object of British fascination or scorn. Rather, they became elevated to the standard by which the British measured and understood Egyptians and their politics. Dicey in fact concluded that Isma‘il’s achievements were considerable for a “prince born and bred in the harem.”

Despite the stories that circulated about his origins, the British looked upon Tawfiq with greater favor than they had Isma‘il, referring to him as Isma‘il’s “better son.” If the British were judging the Egyptian khedives by their willingness to share power with their fellow Egyptians, then such positive reports of Tawfiq’s reign are surprising, for Tawfiq suspended his father’s Chamber of Deputies immediately upon taking the throne. The despotism that had been so abhorrent in the father was clearly tolerated in the son.

Other criteria clearly influenced British opinion about Tawfiq’s governing qualities. Dufferin stated in early 1883 that Tawfiq — his suspension of the Chamber of Deputies notwithstanding — was more like European rulers than his father had been. He wrote, “The Prince now sitting on the Khedival throne represents, at all events, the principle of autonomous government, of hereditary succession, and commercial independence.” Malet found Tawfiq to be powerless but inoffensive and highly grateful to the British to whom “he knew that he owed his life and his throne.” While Milner found Tawfiq to be less civilized than his father had been (he spoke no European languages perfectly, for example), he nonetheless
found that “at heart Tewfik was really much more like a constitutional ruler of the Western type than an Oriental despot, while Ismail was an Oriental despot with a Parisian veneer.”

While many reports about Tawfiq were actually unflattering, he was consistently “recommended” by the British for the job of ruling Egypt. In 1882, Cromer wrote:

If Egypt is in the future no longer to be ruled by a Khedive but by an independent Sovereign, the next question which will arise will be the choice of that Sovereign. I conceive that the present Khedive must certainly be chosen. . . . If an Oriental is to be chosen, I do not think that a better choice could be made than that of the present Khedive. . . . He is not a man of any considerable power or ability, but I believe him to be not only one of the most honest, but also one of the most humane and conscientious Orientals whom I have ever come across.

The khedive’s moral life and domestic habits were frequently juxtaposed with commentary about his fitness for rule. Dicey described Tawfiq as “a man of 27, spare of figure, with a plain but not unkindly face, gifted with good intentions, but with narrow views; a devout believer in Islam; . . . a good husband; a man of moral domestic life; a frugal administrator — such was the Prince who, by the irony of fate, became the successor of Isma’il the Magnificent.” Blunt concurred with Dicey that Tawfiq was an apt ruler, adding to his description of Tawfiq’s “virtues” that the khedive’s domestic life was well-conducted as compared with most of his predecessors and not unadorned with respectable virtues. The fact that Tawfiq was monogamous made its way into most official accounts of the occupation. Regardless of the fact that Tawfiq’s tight-fisted hold on power was unpopular with Egyptians, his domestic life appears to have made him the man for the job of governing Egypt.

Despite the British enthusiasm for Tawfiq, however, and their ill-conceived convictions that he did not evince “any of those ruthless and despotic instincts which signalized the Egyptian Satraps of former days,” Dufferin ultimately informed Gladstone that Egyptians were incapable of reforms: “It is true that Egypt is neither capable of revindicating [national independence] nor fitted to enjoy (constitutional government), in the full acceptation of either term, but she may count on the former being secured to her by the magnanimity of Europe, while she may trust to time for the development of the latter.” Regardless of Tawfiq’s allegedly Western qualities, Dufferin claimed that Egyptian institutions were too steeped in despotism for the “seeds of liberty” to take root without instruction from the British.
As in colonial India, where subjects were required to be “English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, in intellect” but never fully English, Tawfiq embodied the ambiguities of British colonial policy in Egypt. As a man who the British found capable of constitutional rule and, at the same time, malleable and pliant, Tawfiq was symbolic of what Homi Bhabha has called the essential ambivalence of colonial rule. As a “mimic man,” Tawfiq could never be fully modern, but his apparent ability to be reformed made him a suitable cog in the colonial machinery.

Egyptian ministers were subject to the same kind of analysis by colonial officials. In the late 1870s, Cromer linked the personalities of the pashas to their ability to rule, stating that “more depended on the character of and personal influence of the individuals who were chosen than on the special functions which might be assigned to them by a Khedival Decree.” Milner insisted that it was the unfitness of the pasha class to govern that necessitated the veiled protectorate. His experiences with them led him to believe that the pashas’ interest in government rested on little more than personal caprice: “Left to themselves they do not have the strength of character to resist the gradual return of former evils.” He reviled Gladstone’s hopes for a quick evacuation of Egypt, stating that to do so would return the country to the days of “corrupt and effete Pashadom.”

After assuming the position of consul general, Cromer claimed that the domestic behavior of the Egyptian ministers with whom he was supposed to work alarmed him the most. In 1891 he wrote: “There can be no doubt that a real advance has been made in the material progress of this country during the past few years. Whether any moral progress is possible in a country where polygamy and the absence of family life blights the whole social system is another question.”

In most British accounts of Egypt from this period, the roots of “effete Pashadom” were left vague. Dufferin once alluded to Granville that nepotism led to ministerial inefficiency overall. According to Cromer, the harem had produced the “idiosyncrasies of Pashadom.” For Cromer, Tawfiq’s monogamous relationship with his wife was evidence that ridding Egypt of seclusion and polygamy would produce better government. Was it any accident that it was a man with no harem who decided to cooperate with the British and thereby usher in a period of political and economic reform?

Thus, no matter what one cites as the cause of England’s intervention into Egyptian politics, the British conclusion that the character and the morals of the Egyptian elite shaped the Egyptian political realm and
affected its ability to function added a further dimension to “the Egypt question.” The veiled protectorate—the basis of which was an occupation that would stay in place until the practices of both the political and private realms were reformed—was rooted in attitudes about Egypt and its ruling elite that often had little to do with immediate financial and territorial crises. When Gladstone finally conceded that an occupation would have to accompany invasion, he said: “We have now reached a point at which to some extent the choice lies between moral instruction and evacuation . . . and the question is . . . whether we are to try to prepare Egypt for a self-governing future. I believe we have already made our choice.”

Regenerating Egypt:
The Family Politics of the Occupation

Based on investigations into all aspects of Egyptian life, Cromer concluded that when rule by Egyptian khedives ceased to be despotic, liberty would follow. But, in reality, the formulation of a policy through which Egypt would be set on the right track was not so easy. Two opinions circulated about whether or not Egypt would, once abandoned by the British, return to reactionary forms of government. The first, proffered by Lord Dufferin, was that the Egyptians could, in fact, be “tutored” under the “aegis of [British] friendship.” His opinion was that: “the magic wand of education and the subtle force of example would combine to produce a ‘civic sense’—that spirit of liberty without license, or reasonable independence, which is the Anglo-Saxon ideal. And when in the space of a few years a voter’s heart should beat beneath every galabieh [traditional Egyptian garb], and a voter’s sturdy intelligence fill every Egyptian head, then we could withdraw our Army and our Advisors . . . and all would be gloriously well.”

The second opinion came from Lord Cromer, who was not so optimistic. In his view, reform and evacuation were irreconcilable. Only Gladstone’s hatred of facts, Cromer claimed, led the prime minister to support the idea of an evacuation. Cromer claimed that reform of any kind was a long and uncertain business. He also doubted that Egyptians could actually be reformed, stating that the Anglo-Saxon ideal of which Dufferin spoke lay well outside the Egyptians’ grasp.

Cromer depicted Egyptians as being akin to small children, needing constant care and supervision. He told Granville that Tawfiq understood
the duties of a constitutional ruler about as well as Cromer’s six-year-old son. Cromer was fond of comparing Egyptians to children in early stages of development who are capable of little initiative and model their behavior after that of their parents. Explain once “to the Egyptian what he is to do and he will assimilate the idea rapidly. He is a good imitator and will make a faithful, even sometimes a too servile copy of the work of his European master. . . . On the other hand, inasmuch as the Egyptian has but little power of initiation, and often does not thoroughly grasp the reasons why his teachers have impelled him in certain directions, a relapse will ensue if English supervision be withdrawn.” The implication was that Egyptians could be reformed if the British were present to guide their actions, but that the country would slip back into decay were European supervision withdrawn. Such sentiment was but an echo of Stephen Cave’s earlier assessment of Egypt. In 1876 he wrote: “Egypt may be said to be in a transition state . . . she suffers from the defects of the system out of which she is passing as well as from those of the system into which she is attempting to enter.”

Cromer’s rhetoric about reform did not always translate into official policy. Indeed, he was often accused of overlooking the Egyptians’ moral and intellectual advancement in favor of a purely material development of Egypt’s resources. The source of the ambiguous official policy, however, was Cromer’s conviction that the morals of modern Egyptians prevented their final reform and, hence, their emancipation. In casting the moral realm as the utmost stumbling block to modernization and liberation and in claiming that the domestic realm produced effete Egyptians, Cromer linked family politics to the process of modernizing and liberating Egypt.

This formulation is made particularly clear in Cromer’s memoirs, *Modern Egypt*. In his summation of Egyptian society, Cromer pointed to polygamous relationships both as Egypt’s defining characteristic and as the source of its political and economic condition. Consistent with his 1891 memorandum to Nubar Pasha in which he linked political and economic progress with monogamy, Cromer argued in *Modern Egypt* that the whole fabric of European society rested on family life. “Monogamy fosters family life,” he wrote, “polygamy destroys it.” Family life in Europe, he argued, served to foster in European men the kinds of traits and talents that could be transferred to the political realm and make it successful. Without a sound domestic order, little chance existed that such traits could be inculcated in Egyptian men. Neither the monogamous habits of many Egyptian officials nor the repeated attempts of Isma’il and
Tawfiq’s high-ranking administrators to promulgate a constitution seemed to convince Cromer that elite Egyptians behaved much like Europeans of similar class.

Reform would take place by training Egyptians to be like their European masters in habit and taste in order to replace the deleterious effects of polygamy and seclusion with the basic tenets of European society. “If ever the Egyptians learn to govern themselves,” Cromer claimed, “if, in other words, the full execution of the policy of ‘Egypt for the Egyptians’ becomes feasible, the Egyptian question will, it may be hoped and presumed, finally cease to be a cause of trouble to Europe, and the British nation will be relieved of an onerous responsibility.”

The first step toward training Egyptians to govern themselves was weeding out the practices of the harem. Underscoring all of Egyptian civilization, Cromer wrote, was the degradation of women that resulted from the existence of the harem. In perhaps the most often-quoted passage from Modern Egypt, Cromer linked the Egyptians’ inability to reach European standards of modernity and self-sufficiency with the condition of its women:

Looking then solely to the possibility of reforming those countries which have adopted the faith of Islam, it may be asked whether any one can conceive the existence of true European civilization on the assumption that the position which women occupy in Europe is abstracted from the general plan. As well can a man blind from his birth be made to conceive the existence of color? Change the position of women, and one of the main pillars, not only of European civilization but at all events of the moral code based on the Christian religion, if not Christianity itself falls to the ground. The position of women in Egypt, and in Mohammedan countries generally, is, therefore, a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilization, if that civilization is to produce its full measure of beneficial effect.

The two worst manifestations of this degradation, found at all levels of Egyptian society, were, according to Cromer, veiling and seclusion. Seclusion had “baneful” effects on society, the most important of which was that it limited women’s intellectual development and, hence, that of men. “Moreover,” he wrote: “inasmuch as women, in their capacities as wives and mothers, exercise a great influence over the characters of their husbands and sons, it is obvious that the seclusion of women must produce a deteriorating effect on the male population, in whose presumed interests the custom was established and is still maintained.” According to Cromer, the next step in making “better” pashas — after the eradication
of the harem—was the restructuring of the Egyptian educational system. The old-fashioned Egyptian pasha, Cromer claimed, was undisciplined, afraid of change, immoderate, prejudiced, self-deceived, and nepotistic; he needed to be replaced with men of better character. Despite his sometimes skeptical stance toward the project of educating Egyptians, Cromer often cited the system of public education as being an arena in which old traits might be replaced with Victorian habits and sensibilities. But hope for the creation of better character in Egyptians was in vain without the reform of the family and the education of women. “The position of women in Egypt,” Cromer argued, “is a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilization, if that civilization is to produce its full measure of beneficial effect.”

Despite his position that Egyptians were ultimately not reformable, Cromer did concede that education and exposure to Europeans had begun to change Egyptians in both habits and tastes. “Enlightened Egyptians,” according to Cromer, were catching on to monogamy, and, therefore, exhibiting more appealing political tendencies. Cromer cited two Egyptian ministers, Sherif and Riad, as “monogamous notabilities” morally sound and capable of solid political judgment. Cromer seemed to forget that Sherif and Riad were on opposite sides of the debate about constitutionalism, and that monogamy had not rid Riad of his tendencies toward absolutism. The domestic practices of reformed Egyptians, and their manifestation in the political arena, apparently held the key to Egypt’s success. Domestic practices served as proof, however insubstantial, that an open-ended period of reform was necessary as well as beneficial.

Conclusion

As the private realm of Egypt’s khedives and its elite class was made synonymous with Egyptian institutions, elite domestic behavior became conflated with the success of the body politic. Despite the very concrete territorial and economic concerns that led the British to occupy Egypt, their formulation of the veiled protectorate appears to have been shaped by anecdote, impression, travel literature, and the British conclusion that Egyptians were not fit for self-rule. The British overlooked the fact that Isma’il fell victim to policies that allowed for the continued emergence of landed, commercial, and administrative elites with a greater stake in
Egyptian power. While the Chamber of Deputies was hardly a parliament, and while Isma‘il cannot be termed a constitutional ruler, the British overlooked Isma‘il’s increasingly slippery grip on absolutism.

Nonetheless, British officials confidently attached behavior in and outside houses to an indefinite program of reform that they claimed would create a generation of capable Egyptians and then liberate them. “England,” wrote Dicey in 1880, “will allow Egypt to enter a new stage of its history.” Like a child possessing much potential but no autonomy, Egypt needed to be led, taught, supervised—parented—such that it could, at some indeterminate point, be emancipated. According to Cromer, “It was originally contemplated that the occupation should be of short duration, and should come to an end when the Khedive’s authority was again fully established. It was found, however . . . that the work of reform . . . was not to be set on foot in such a short while, as had been hoped by some authorities, but would require Egypt to be nursed and tended to a slow maturity.”

The paternal nature of the veiled protectorate is easily seen in the structures of the protectorate itself. Cromer did nothing to strengthen the constitutional forms of the khedivate; rather, he worked as what M. W. Daly has referred to as an “estate manager,” increasing the number of British advisors to oversee the work of the Egyptians. The Egyptian administration was left in place and put under the parentage of British supervisors. Egyptians were not dismissed from their governing positions and replaced by Europeans, nor were Egyptian governing institutions closed down—in fact, new positions were created, albeit with very limited functions. “Native rule” was thus maintained, but it was subjected to the overbearing presence of British supervision. Foreign Secretary Lord Salisbury called it “advice,” but Cromer made it clear that “they [the Egyptian elite] must, on important matters, do what they were told.” While “reform” of the Egyptian elite remained central to the ideology of occupation, Cromer had no policy or “plan” for it. Egyptians would be both free to work and enslaved by their overseers until the reform of its political institutions took place.

The politics of the veiled protectorate were thus likened to the politics of sound motherhood—of raising Egypt to a new level of development. Reform of Egyptian home life would produce a new parentage, replacing Isma‘il’s immoral lineage with a new one. In this equation, women or images of them and their place in the Egyptian domicile were not directly responsible for the political or economic crisis that caused the occupation. Women were, however, implicated in the construction of the
Egypt problem and its solution. While such women were merely specters, indistinct visions of harem inmates, they were consistently evoked in the construction of the Egypt the British thought they were occupying and reforming. In the gendered politics of the veiled protectorate, women were not necessarily seen, but the image of their seclusion in the harem and their relationship to Egyptian rulers was a constant presence.

Imperialism thus did not merely result in the feminization of the Orient, as Edward Said has argued, but rather in its concomitant infan
tilization. Both the British and, later, Egyptian nationalists used images of Egyptian women to symbolize, respectively, the backwardness and strengths of the Egyptian body politic. Each group could claim to protect, nurture, and herald feminine Egypt as an indication of its success at reforming her. In the British equation of colonial discourse, Egyptian men had to be transformed themselves before they could claim the authority to reform Egypt. In order to take their positions as fathers of a new Egyptian order, Egyptian men had to endure a “childhood” before “growing up.”

Thus, while territorial and economic concerns explain the invasion of Egypt, British occupation and the relationship that developed between the two parties arose out of the understanding the British had of Egypt and the Egyptians. The contract that was established between the British and the Egyptians between 1882 and the 1919 Revolution was based on an understanding that the British would leave after Egyptians matured and demonstrated a new assortment of virtues, morals, and behaviors. The genesis of such new cultural and social codes was to be their homes. For Egyptians to demonstrate that they were ready to take Egypt’s political and economic affairs back into their own hands, they would have to show that the affairs of their domiciles were in order. For the politics of the occupation to be overruled — for Egypt to claim that it was a nation ready for self-rule — a set of modern, Egyptian domestic behaviors would have to be shaped, learned, and, finally, put on display.