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Antoine Le Camus and Alexandre Wenger, *Abdeker ou l'art de conserver la beauté: 1754*. Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon, 2008. 277 pp. Notes and bibliography. 20 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-84137-238-6.

Review by Antoinette Sol, University of Texas at Arlington.

One may well ask why one would be interested in an obscure eighteenth-century beauty manual. In his scholarly introduction to this new edition of Antoine Le Camus's *Abdeker ou l'art de conserver la beauté* (1754), Alexandre Wenger makes a good case for a modern reading of this rather odd text. Situating the text and the author in their historical context, Wenger argues that the interest to modern readers and the originality of the text lies in its hybrid nature and formal properties. It is at once an oriental tale belonging to a long tradition of this genre and a historical document testifying to eighteenth-century canons of beauty, social and aesthetic practices. According to Wenger, the text is tied to Enlightenment ideology of the perfectibility of man and founded in current theories of the solidarity of body and spirit. Wenger suggests that there is a subversive side to this text as well in that its sensual atmosphere and libertine scenes encourage an exploration of desire. There is, Wenger observes, an "ambiguïté morale" (p. 30) and series of contradictions conveyed by the story of Fatmé and Abdeker and its exploration of beauty.

The story of Abdeker related by the eighteenth-century physician Le Camus was said to be a "translation" of an Arabic manuscript brought to Paris in 1740 by one Diamantes Ulasto, the Turkish ambassador's doctor. It tells the tale of a young woman, Fatmé, who is sold to the Sultan Mohamet, a passionate and violent leader. She, of course, is indifferent to his affections. When Mohamet falls ill and is cured by a young doctor, Abdeker, the sultan rewards him by appointing him *Premier Médecin de Sa Hautesse* (p. 48). Part of Abdeker's duties is to see to the well being of the *odalisques* in the sultan's seraglio and this is where he encounters Fatmé and falls in love. During the course of the tale, Fatmé finds out the story of her true birth, her true mother, and her true love. Her education, like the reader's, takes place during discussions with Abdeker. In addition to the discussions with Fatmé on what constitutes beauty, the doctor deals with health issues presented to him by the other *odalisques*, such as oral hygiene and inoculation against small pox.

The tale of Fatmé and Abdeker belongs to a genre of the exotic—and often erotic—tale that was in vogue in France for most of the eighteenth century. The course of this genre may have been uneven but it never really fell out of favor altogether. Exoticism would wane temporarily only to re-emerge in another form later. At the beginning of the century, Antoine Galland's translation of *Mille et une nuits* (1704-1717) served as the impetus for three main periods of exotic tales. The first was the great oriental vogue of 1720s marked by Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721). The second was characterized by the wave erotic exotic parodies of the 1740s typified by Crébillon's *Le Sopha* (1742) and Diderot's *Bijoux indiscrets* (1748). The third followed a transitional period in the 1750s during which the publication of Rousseau's first and second discourses (1750, 1755) prepared the way for the resurgence of exoticism in the late 1770s and early 1780s in the form of noble savage narratives. Other cultural manifestations of the popularity of all things oriental were the proliferation of imported art objects, painted wall papers, chinoiserie, travel literature, and exotic dress, to name a few. Exotic narratives were used as settings for titillating tales, as political allegories, as thinly disguised vehicles for social criticism, and as a way in

which to question gender roles, religious hypocrisy, and the nature of individual rights. They were also, as in Le Camus's *Abdeker ou l'art de conserver la beauté* shows, a means of disseminating health information.

The eighteenth century began the movement towards the medicalization of beauty care realized in the nineteenth century. In "The Medical Control of Women's *Toilette* in France, 1750-1820," Morag Martin points out that philosophes added their secular voice to the religious criticism of cosmetics dating back to the sixteenth century. In the face of mounting criticism and "calls for a ban on all cosmetics found in tracts, novels and newspapers," beauty manuals came to fill the gap.[1] Grounding their arguments against cosmetics in moral as well as aesthetic concerns, the philosophes protested that heavy use of cosmetics feminized men, was unbecoming to idealized conceptions of womanhood, and hid one's soul to judgment by reason. By fostering deceit and debauchery, cosmetics foiled the establishment of a "self-evident hierarchy of merit." As Terry Smiley Dock observes, many articles warning of the danger of noxious composition and the ill effects of cosmetics appeared in the *Encyclopédie*. [2] According to Martin, the use of cosmetics also went against scientific precepts upon which new conceptions of beauty were based. Transparency in behavior as well as appearance was allied to the science of physiognomy, the reading of facial traits. As a result, men generally stopped wearing foundation and rouge, but women proved more resistant to change and their behavior changed little.

Rather more effective than the arguments of the philosophes were those made by the medical community. The criticism of cosmetics was part of a "larger shift towards creating healthier subjects through science." [3] In mid-century, this movement toward improved health through hygiene picked up momentum with the opening of public baths on the Seine in Paris in 1760. According to Martin, nineteen beauty manuals that aimed to establish a healthy *toilette* were published between 1750 and 1818. Supplanting perfumers, chemists and apothecaries, doctors took on the role of advisor in daily personal hygiene, turning the former *cabinet de toilette* as spectacle and a site of pleasure into a practical domestic one.

The 1750s formed the juncture of two moments, one in which the exotic tale moved towards a more serious tone and the other in which beauty advice moved out of the hands of charlatans and chemists and into the realm of medicine. *Abdeker ou l'art de conserver la beauté*, published anonymously in 1754, connected the two strands through an exotic narrative that included advice on healthy beauty practices and preventative medical care. The text wove ancient and modern medical knowledge into a tale with mysterious threads of the orient, scented with the heady perfume of the senses. Le Camus was actually more well-known at the time for his book *La Médecine de l'esprit* (1753) which established him in the forefront of the "vogue of intellectual self-improvement" emerging in the 1750s. *Docteur regent* and member of the medical faculty of the University of Paris, Le Camus chose to address a broader public than just his professional colleagues or students in that book. As Anne Vila notes, Le Camus used "the conceit that his readers are themselves philosophes—that is, individuals interested in understanding both their own internal mental operations and medicine 'as a field of human knowledge.'" [4]

In *Abdeker*, published the following year, Le Camus accomplished something similar. He encouraged the reader to explore his or her sensibilities through the exotic love story while enhancing their knowledge of hygiene. Setting up his tale for the reader, Le Camus states in the preface that "L'auteur pénètre jusque dans le sanctuaire des plaisirs; mais sans effaroucher les Grâces qui en gardent l'entrée" (p. 45). However, he also alerts the reader to the serious and complete treatment of the topic of beauty. "En effet, tout ce qui peut la détruire ou la conserver, l'augmenter ou la diminuer, se trouvera développé dans tout son jour. Causes physiques, causes morales, rien n'est omis" (p. 45).

Le Camus figures himself in the text as "un Médecin, mais un Médecin amoureux qui initie sa Maîtresse, la plus belle femme de l'univers, dans tous les mystères de la Beauté" (p. 45). The reader is cast as Fatmé, his love. Le Camus underscores the fact that the *traité*/love story is destined for an enlightened

female readership, not only through Fatmé's intellectual curiosity but also through the portrayal of her mother: "Marie était un Philosophe sur le Trône; elle méprisait les grandeurs humaines, et aurait préféré les douceurs d'une vie ignorée à tout l'éclat d'une Cour brillante, où l'on trouvait l'exemple du crime, que l'image de la vertu" (p. 194).

Le Camus draws attention as well to the "forme singulière" of his enterprise (p. 46), which is constructed around conversations, observations and a system of annotation and *renvois*. The text is divided into two parts, each of which is followed by "Observations." A "Bibliothèque de la toilette" follows the *Observations* at the end of part one. All the conversations with Fatmé and the others are extensively footnoted by Le Camus. A third and fourth part made their appearance in later editions and a summary of the chapters are included in the modern edition under review.

Le Camus's tale offers a fascinating example of how this enlightened doctor linked beauty and health with desire tinged by exoticism. In his discussions with the *odalisques*, Le Camus recommended treatments for warts, corns, abnormal weight, and skin diseases, and even discussed a "rétrécissement de la peau" for women who had many children or needed to "recover" their virginity. This links nicely to the exotic tradition and brings to mind, for example, Crébillon's *Ecumoire: histoire japonaise* (1734), in which a magical incantation, rather than scientific expertise, was used to restore virginity.^[5] A moment in which medical and cosmetic advice affect the exotic narrative comes during Abdeker's discussion on the judicious use of "rouge, fard and des mouches" to hide passions and mask bodily manifestations of them. Wenger points out that in this instance, the art of cosmetics literally saves Fatmé's life by rendering her sensible body illegible to the sultan. Abdeker figures as an avatar of the doctor as demiurge whose domain is this seraglio born out of a male fantasy.

Wenger sums up the contribution of this strange novel-treatise as an early manifestation of the redefinition of what falls under the purview of medicine. In his hybrid work, Le Camus conflates the art and practice of love with that of writing and medicine. In addition, this strange combination of exotic, erotic tale of love combined with the beauty and hygiene manual could be seen as preparing the way for other hybrid texts, such as the marquis de Sade's *Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795) where philosophy takes the place of medicine and theory and practice are in a different, but similar, dialogue in yet another incarnation of the boudoir.

NOTES

[1] Morag Martin, "Doctoring Beauty: The Medical Control of Women's *Toilette* in France, 1750-1820," *Medical History* 49 (2005): 351-368, at 351.

[2] Terry Smiley Dock, *Women in the Encyclopédie : a Compendium* (Potomac, Md: Studia Humanitatis, 1983), 67.

[3] Martin, "Doctoring Beauty," 353.

[4] Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 83.

[5] Claude-Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, *Ecumoire: histoire japonaise*. This tale was first published as *Tanzai et Néadarné* (Londres, aux dépends de la Compagnie, 1734) and has been reprinted by A.G. Nizet, 1976.

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