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Less is Gore: Graphic Violence in the Fiction of Judith Gautier

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Considering Judith Gautier was a woman who led a relatively sheltered existence—indeed, she received part of her education in a convent and never travelled to the exotic countries described in her fiction—it is difficult to explain the prominent place accorded to gore, gruesomeness, and the macabre in her works (Brahimi 34). I will attempt to shed light on this mystery by studying the striking images of graphic violence in her anthropological work *Les Peuples étranges* (1879), and in her novels *Les Princesses d'amour* (1900), *Les Mémoires d'un éléphant blanc* (1894), *L'Usurpateur* (1875), and especially *Le Dragon impérial* (1869). In so doing, I hope to show how these texts, through their deft handling of traditionally "masculine" subject matter, not only provided an entrée to the rarefied, male-dominated world of nineteenth-century French letters, but also articulated a unique theory of the novel—one that sees fiction writing above all as the expression of the violence inherent to and existing inside representation itself, a vision of writing similar to that of Jacques Derrida in his seminal work *De la grammatologie*.

The exceptionally beautiful Judith Gautier (1845-1917), daughter of Théophile Gautier and Italian opera diva Ernesta Grisi, and wife of poet Catulle Mendès, was raised in the epicenter of Europe's literary and artistic avant-garde.[1] Among the weekly visitors to her parents' home were Flaubert, Baudelaire, Delacroix, Dumas, Taine, Mallarmé, Puivis de Chavannes, and the Goncourt brothers. She became a best-selling novelist, an early champion of Richard Wagner (she was his inspiration for *Parsifal*, which she translated into French), a successful journalist, musicologist and art critic, a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, and the first woman elected to the prestigious Goncourt Academy.[2] Like her father's, her literary output was enormous. Over the course of several decades, she published more than fifty volumes of poetry, prose and drama and over a hundred essays and articles on arts and letters, and she was known for her abilities as a painter, sculptor and musician as well (Mirham 170-172 and Yu, Alabaster, 464).

In 1857, when Théophile Gautier wrote his Egyptian work *Le Roman de la momie*, he enlisted Judith as his assistant, and later she provided him with details of her convent life that he used in *Spirite* (1865). He thus transmitted to his daughter his passion for the Orient, one he shared with many of his contemporaries and which provided him with exotic place names and a poetic vocabulary evocative of pagan deities and unusual fauna and scenery.

Consequently, the Orient remained an important element in all her works, whether as subject or as setting. Interest in the East, at the time, focused mainly on the Levant, now called the Middle East, primarily as a result of Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition (1798-1801). French writers began to travel there and to report on their voyages, but it was Chateaubriand, in his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem* (1811), who established a route that many aspiring young writers, including Théophile Gautier, were to retrace enthusiastically: around the Mediterranean, to Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Jerusalem, Tunis, and home through Spain. Works by Nerval, Flaubert, Hugo, Lamartine, and Vigny, as well as Delacroix's enormous dossier of drawings from Morocco are but a few examples of the extraordinary influence that orientalism had on France in the nineteenth century (Mihram 171 and 173).

But Judith Gautier's interest in the Far East ran contrary to her contemporaries' prevalent interest in the Middle East. A student of several non-European languages, including Chinese, Japanese and Persian[3], she drew extensively on material from Egypt, but especially Persia, India, Siam, Japan, and above all China, the inspiration for her most influential and widely read books (Yu, *Alabaster,* 464). Here too, her father was supremely influential, for according to many, he was the first French writer in the nineteenth century to exploit that country's artistic possibilities. His poem *Chinoiserie* in *Poésies diverses* (1833-38) and his Chinese novella *Le pavillon sur l'eau* (1846), both favorites of Judith, are but a couple examples.[4] She wrote at least sixteen plays, including one treating Chinese courtesans, *Princesses d'Amour* (1908), and collaborated with Pierre Loti on a Chinese play for Sara Bernhardt, *La Fille du ciel* (1911). Her articles about China in *Le Journal Officiel* dealt with a great many subjects: theater, painting, poetry, music, medicine, and ceremonial rites such as marriages and funerals. A number of those writings were reprinted in *Les Peuples étranges* (1879) and later in a children's book, *En Chine* (1911). Japan provided the setting for a chapter titled "Tokio" in *Les Capitales du monde* (1890), and early in her career she published five articles dealing with the China-Japan-Siam exhibits at the Exposition Universelle of 1867. Hence, art, music, and the literature of Asia and India were her lifelong interests (Mihram 172-74).

But her father's most significant contribution to shaping his daughter's career occurred in 1863, when he engaged a Chinese man named Ding Dunling (or Tin-Tun-Ling, depending on the source), a translator in need of financial support, as tutor for then teenage Judith and her younger sister Estelle. Both daughters studied with him for several years, Judith being the more enthusiastic and diligent of the two. For four years, visitors to the household were struck by Ding's almost daily presence (Yu, Alabaster, 466). Her father not only presented her with a Chinese tutor, but also, in a privilege that must remain unique in its annals, arranged for her to take home rare Chinese manuscripts from the Bibliothèque Impériale, today the Bibliothèque Nationale (Richardson xv). Not surprisingly, she first achieved literary fame by using her skills in Mandarin, producing the first translation into French of the works of renowned Chinese poets, *Le livre de jade* (1867)—undoubtedly one of the earliest translations of Asian poetry published in any European language and still a vital book, as

evidenced by its reissue in a new edition in 2004 by the Imprimerie Nationale in France (Yu, Alabaster, 479).[5] Later, in publishing her volume of translations *Poèmes de la libellule* (1885), she was instrumental in introducing Europeans to Japanese poetry as well (Mihram 173). Much of her work is strikingly relevant today, such as the prophetic novel *Le vieux de la montagne* (1893), which chronicles the eleventh-century Islamic Ismaili sect of fundamentalist terrorists, precursors of our contemporary Osama Bin Laden (Knapp 2).

Yet, despite these fascinating and remarkable achievements, critical studies devoted to her are limited to a handful of articles, generally treating either *Le livre de jade* or her three-volume autobiography, *Le collier des jours* (1902, 1903 and 1909).[6] Possible reasons for this neglect are likely the sheer volume of her publications, coupled with her longtime tendency to contribute to a wide array of newspapers and periodicals under various pseudonyms.[7] In addition, until quite recently almost all of her novels were out of print, and toward the end of her life, she reproduced large parts of her earlier published work almost verbatim under new titles (Mirham 175). Joanna Richardson, one of her biographers, even suggests that a comprehensive bibliography of all of her writings in now impossible (xvi). Whatever the reason for the lack of scholarship, no books, no articles, and only one unpublished dissertation are devoted to her novels. Work on her fiction is thus long overdue and will complement the numerous biographies.[8]

In the same way that violence is inextricably bound up with its representations, so it is also inextricably tied to gender and sexuality—which explains our surprise when faced with a woman author deeply interested in violence. As Michael S. Kimmel writes: "Violence remains perhaps the most gendered behavior in our culture" (273). More specifically, this violence is primarily associated with men and masculinity, either because men sexualize their weaponry as phallic and their victims as female, or because "most episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men" (Connell 83). In fact, it is partly because violence is seen as intrinsically or as culturally male that violent women, from Medea to Salome to Judith, and women artists who portray violence, like Gautier, represent such a challenge to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (Heathcote, Introduction, 3). Gautier is therefore unique in her depictions of torture, epic battles, warriors, and assassins both male and female.

And the fact that Edward Said, in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) makes no mention of nineteenth-century women Orientalists (he treats Théophile, but not Judith) suggests she is equally unique in this respect, as a rare female among men. Indeed, we are hard pressed to think of another woman Orientalist of the nineteenth century. This is unsurprising, if we consider which Europeans, specifically, possessed access to the East at that time. For Said: "The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about the Orient because he *could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part" (7). (The operative word here is "he"). The lack of women Orientalists, therefore, is due largely to their lack of access, both geographical and intellectual, to that part of the world. In this respect, we begin

to understand how much Western cultural hegemony, in the nineteenth century, was analogous to Western male hegemony.

Gautier not only stands out among Orientalists as a woman interested primarily in the Far East, but also in her different take on hegemonic violence—the violence by which one culture (for my purposes, the Occident) gains political and cultural dominion over another (the Orient). Often in Orientalist texts, the East is depicted as the exotic feminine Other, a site where the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures is played out (Said 7). This perspective is, by definition, informed by imperialism and influenced by the Western frame of reference. The central assumption is the creation of an East-West dichotomy, a dominated-dominator polarity. But the most unique characteristics distinguishing Gautier's fiction are her reliance on original Eastern textual material combined with her unusual narrating voice. Rather than create Western traveler-narrators, she permits Oriental narrators to tell the tale directly. In fact, of her five Orientalist novels, only one contains developed Western characters.[9] And both *Le Dragon impérial* and *L'Usurpateur* treat civil wars—in China and Japan respectively. Her attempt is thus to remove the authorial voice of the Western writer in order to lend credibility to the story and present the East on its own terms. Hence, her texts present a different take on hegemony in their movement away from a Franco-centric vision (Goldsmith 24-25).

Her best-selling first novel, *Le Dragon impérial*, published when she was only twenty-three years old, is a case in point as probably the first French novel to have an exclusively Chinese plot, setting, and characters.[10] Praised by Mallarmé as "une grande merveille" (307) and by Anatole France as a sustained poem (136), admired by Flaubert and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam as well, it is based on the ancient Chinese superstition that when a person's shadow takes the shape of a dragon, that person is destined to become the next emperor, unless someone breaks the silence and reveals the sign (Leiva 37). Then, not only will he not become emperor but chaos will reign and terrible misfortunes occur. From this ancient proverb, Gautier spins a rich tapestry taking place during the reign of the Manchu Emperor Kang-Si (1662-1722). Although it is not strictly speaking based on fact, the heart of the plot line, a planned uprising to overthrow Kang-Si, could have possibly occurred. Ta-Kiang, the young peasant whose shadow takes the shape of a dragon, is destined to supplant Kang-Si, and together with his fiancée Yo-Me-Li and friend, the loyal poet Ko-Li-Tsin, he sets out toward Peking to fulfill his quest (Goldsmith 25-26).

The work combines elements of the picaresque novel and the medieval quest story, alternating portrayals of the majestic beauty of China, and romantic love and honor with very violent, bloody depictions of battle and torture. The poet, the most developed character, has in fact two quests: one political and one artistic quest to write the perfect philosophical poem, in order to win the hand of his beloved. His endearingly winsome quality stems from an ever-nourishing creative impulse, but also from the fact that he is madly in love with a woman he has never seen. At once clever, joyful, and bizarre, this delicate-looking, elegant creature is also a highly skilled, saber-wielding warrior, proficient in all forms of

military strategy. Hence, part of his appeal derives from his dual character as the perfect aesthete and the perfect warrior, his embodiment of both beauty and violence. Interestingly, the refined Ming emperor, who ultimately forgives the poet and is deeply moved by his final poem, represents the same duality, though he is a less developed character.

Gautier's poetic descriptions of the scenery are veritable word paintings owing their inspiration to Chinese landscape painting. Her intermingling of poetry imitating Eastern styles with the body of prose—indeed, each chapter begins with a prose poem—demonstrates her desire to apply her skills as a translator of Chinese poetry to the novel. These translations, published two years earlier, had been particularly popular with the Parnassians, the prevailing poetic school of the time, who saw in them the impassive, impersonal, and lapidary qualities they admired (Rubins 147). Hence, in its juxtaposition of prose, poetry, and word painting *Le Dragon impérial* appealed to the Parnassians in several ways: in their desire to authentically restore Oriental cultures, (rather than simply use them as a backdrop), in their goal to enrich poetry with the effects of the visual arts, and in their wish to celebrate the interrelationship between all the arts (Rubins 147 and Goldsmith 26-27).

The heroes must leave their tranquil country home to fulfill their quest in the tumultuous capital of Peking, and chapter two chronicles their arrival with a spectacular fifteen-page word painting, an amazing cityscape that combines fabulous architecture with lush gardens. Here, the political clash between Chinese and Tartar is expressed in the very structure of the city itself, in the collision of the elegant Cité Tartare with the sordid Cité Chinoise. Gautier contrasts the suffering and poverty of most Chinese with the lavish festivities and opulent life styles of the wealthy. Indeed, the three protagonists pursue their odyssey from stinking, squalor-filled neighborhoods to opulent ones where sumptuously clad citizens are carried in sedan chairs by coolies among the delicately carved ivory, gold, silver and bejeweled art objects (Knapp 84). The complex meanderings of the endless mud streets control and contain violence at the same time as they give it expression.

Violence is imprinted on the streets themselves, as the crushing multitudes, even the shopkeepers, struggle against the onslaught of black smoke and stifling, fetid smells emanating from the ramshackle hovels and shops, and from the vermin-infested piles of bric-à-brac and debris of all types (24-25). A cacophony of sounds assaults the travelers: screeching vendors, animals making their wants known in loud and vibrant registers, high-pitched tones of strolling instrumentalists, jugglers, mimes, orators, monks, and even camels join the melée (Knapp 83). Gruesome images play a significant role in Gautier's verbal canvas. In noisy marketplaces, suspended in birdcages above various foodstuffs, the bloody, decapitated heads of recently executed criminals serve as terrifying examples to the oppressed masses:

> [...] au dessus des victuailles, dans des cages d'osier suspendus à des poteaux, apparaissent, hideuses, des têtes de criminels, récemment executés; souvent les

> cages sont brisés, effondrées, et les têtes, retenues seulement par leurs nattes, se balancent horriblement, verdâtres, grimaçantes, effroyables. (22)

Decapitation, in its association with the guillotine and the Terror is likely the most iconic image of violence in French culture, a fact that may help to explain the shock value and particularly visceral impact of this passage for French readers. These hideous heads are both a foreshadowing device and a visual motif repeated throughout the work—in the remarkable resemblance between Ta-Kiang and one of the severed heads, in the staircase scene with the decapitated heads of the statues of the gods, in the bloody dénouement when the main characters slit their own throats, in the final, smiling expression on the severed head of the poet, and in the horrific images filling the final pages: "Des monticules formés de corps sanglants et des monceaux de têtes grimaçantes bosselaient lugubrement la place" (300). Likewise, the sordid labyrinth of streets is later re-expressed in the endless corridors of the dungeon, while the haunting image of the dragon is often repeated as well—in the gigantic contours of Ta-Kiang's shadow, in the form of spiral staircases, in the shape of sunsets and lanterns, in the outline of a giant kite against the moon, on costumes and weaponry, in both the opening and closing sentences of the novel.

Carnage is poeticized through the use of color motifs like red and white, motifs that often exploit the artistic possibilities of blood and fire: "...les têtes des vieillards, s'entr'ouvrent et pleurent du sang sur leurs barbes blanches..." (216) And "Le Chef était sanglant et superbe; il s'agenouilla au milieu de la salle, tachant de rouge les dalles d'albâtre" (292). The novel opens with the image of the increasingly whitening light cast on the expanding horizon at dawn, and closes with a blood-red sunset. "Ça et là, sur l'azur pale du ciel, il semblait qu'on vît des éclaboussures de sang" (312). Similarly, having reached the outskirts of "The Red City," the three protagonists marvel at the impressive ramparts, pavilions, vaulted galleries, superimposed terraces, and stately cannons—all seemingly ablaze in the sunset's red glow (19). In this way, the text is punctuated with the colors of red and white as blood mingles with skulls and broken bones, washes over the horizon, over alabaster floors and staircases, and soaks women's pearls and old men's beards.

This painterly use of color, coupled with the motif of the decapitated head, reappears in *Les Princesses d'amour*, when the proud geisha La Perle slits her own throat rather than give herself to a Westerner, and dies in a pool of blood: "La Perle gisait dans un lac de sang. Elle s'était coupé la gorge, avec un sabre ancien, qui avait appartenu au shogun Taïko-Sama" (118). Gautier's juxtaposition of the colors red and white affirms her desire to make an artistic statement on both formal and semantic levels. In Chinese culture, the color red is the traditional color of weddings, and is generally forbidden at funerals, as it symbolizes good luck, joy, and happiness. Blood, moreover, is intimately linked to the notion of "qi," translating as "energy" or "life force." The Ancient Chinese believed that we inherit our essence from our father and blood from our mother, both vital to human life. And the very life force and energy, "qi" is closely associated with blood. White, on the other hand, represents fulfillment,

mourning, and death, and is the predominant color at obsequies.[11] Thus, these hues are not only striking visually, but also suggest her desire to affirm and juxtapose the contrasting forces of life and death. Her creation of macabre visual motifs, moreover, constantly underlines the notion of the symbiotic relationship between violence and representation.

Disguised as a male servant, Yo-Men-Li gains access to the royal palace, and makes a valiant assassination attempt on the emperor. When she fails, however, the poet takes the blame, and is led to the torture chambers, a sinister labyrinth of black granite cells and corridors where torture becomes artistic ritual. Indeed, here, violence and aesthetics become indistinguishable in the ornate accoutrements of the macabre interrogation hall, darkly named "le Palais de la Sincérité" (100). An entire paragraph is devoted to the interrogator's elaborate chair, with its finely embroidered depiction of Tang, a bright blue lion engaged in the ferocious act of devouring the Sun (101). Red silk lanterns cast an eerie glow on the multitude of spiral staircases, while highlighting the wisdom of the philosophers inscribed on the walls in gold characters—characters that, in their close ties to violence, bring to mind the scene from *Les Princesses d'amour*, when a geisha, in ritualistic preparation for hari-kari, dons her favorite kimono—the one covered with poetry: "On apporta aussitôt la robe, qui était ce jour-là, en satin couleur de thé faible, toute couverte de poèmes, brodés en noir dans des carrés d'or. (216-17).

Here, violence is seen as an integral part of literary creation, lending itself to endless metaphorical transformations, so much so that the poet's aesthetic pleasure actually trumps his excruciating physical pain. When brutally interrogated, he responds with wit, sarcasm, and above all, spontaneous verse—the latter proving particularly maddening for his henchmen:

> —On ne te demande pas de vers, dit le juge en fronçant les sourcils.
> —C'est une largesse que je vous fais. (102).

Readers are given descriptions of the poet's head held tightly by a cord around his neck while his torturers, after failing to extract a confession from him, proceed to nail small bamboo blades under his fingernails and toenails. Again, violence and aesthetics are fused: When the blades are nailed into each of his fingertips, the act of reading becomes a balm that quells his instinct to cry out in pain: "Les bourreaux frappèrent avec de petits maillets sur les lames de bamboo, qui enfoncèrent cruellement dans les doigts du poète. Il crispa ses orteils, ouvrit sa bouche, mais il lisait les sentences des philosophes en or sur le mur noir." (104). When his fingers spout five vermilion streams of blood, he compares his hand to the famous alabaster fountain of the Yu-Min-Ué gardens, again underlining the red/white color motif, while offering his torturers a detailed verbal ekphrasis complete with statuary (104-105). At the sight of the spurting blood, one of his executioners, in a state of sadistic ecstasy, grabs hold of his knife and starts piercing holes all over his body. The poet's facial contractions convey intense pain, yet his humor and dedication to his art again relieve him, at least momentarily, from the pulsating throbs attacking his body (Knapp 89).

When they pour molten tar into his gaping wounds, he asks only for time to think and something to write with" "Donne-moi donc de quoi écrire et laisse-moi songer" (106). And when beaten on his kidneys with a burning-hot flexible steel strip, he faints, screaming his agony: this is the mind's way of preventing him from betraying his stoically imposed muteness (Knapp 89).

The four Siamese torture victims in *Les Peuples étranges*, part of a lively festival, display similar stoicism and dedication to art in the face of death. One sings as his temples are set on fire, another rejoins the crowd after his hand is cut off, another eats a banana as his stomach is cut open. All suffer in silence, refusing to cry out (235-237). After the poet's torture in *Le Dragon impérial*, Yo-Men-Li is thrown into the same damp, rot-filled dungeon, and its enormous rodent population wreaks havoc among the prisoners, tearing into their flesh, bloodying them and infecting them with disease. The scene in which starving inmates reach out to feed on the guts of monstrously large rats is unforgettable. Her hunger, pain, and constant war with the rodents spark nightmarish hallucinations of lugubrious beauty:

> Sa prison se peupla d'êtres fantastiques, effroyables. Ses yeux ouverts démeusurément voyaient des lueurs rouges où s'agitaient des hommes monstrueux, des bourreaux, des tortionnaires, des victimes sanglantes, des cadavres, des démons aux faces funèbres qui la menaçaient d'armes brûlantes. (256)

In this way, intense physical pain is seen as a tremendous spark to creativity, and as such, is constantly abstracted and turned into art. Indeed, everything in these scenes foregrounds the notion that writing is born of violence and is dissociable from it. Gautier's poetics are thus evidence of Jacques Derrida's contention that language is not just a medium for violence, but the actual embodiment of it, demonstrating "l'unité de la violence et de l'écriture" (156).

The poet escapes the chamber of horrors with the help of the brave woman Yu-Tchin, and they seek refuge in the pagoda of the Blue Lily, the seat of their fellow insurgents. The poet, still reeling from his wounds, is left in command of their army and must defend the edifice from the epic siege carried out by the Tigers, the imperial soldiers. Here, the marriage of art and violence again becomes apparent as the ornate pagoda resonates with catastrophe. Trapped in a giant alabaster staircase, outnumbered and possessing no traditional ammunition, the poet-warrior constructs a unique battle plan centered on the use of the surrounding architecture and statuary. Marble dust falls like snow as his men hack away at the intricately sculptured balustrades, piling some up to create barriers while using others as projectiles. Amidst a din of battle cries, clouds of enemy arrows scrape the porcelain walls, while moonbeams catch the whiteness of the stone and marble embedded in the tumultuous pile of broken shoulders and crushed skulls (128). The giddy poet gazes joyously at the carnage, again forgetting his physical pain and losing himself in the enjoyment of his creativity. Hit in the shoulder, he rips the arrow out with his teeth and spits it out with relish (128).

But soon there are no more projectiles, remaining only the colossal gold heads of the gods with their turquoise-encrusted pedestals. The warriors push the statues off of their bases one by one, and the gods rain down, forming a brilliant mass of giant boulders, bounding down the stairs, and crushing the enemy. One could imagine this as an exterior scene, as boulders roll down a hillside under the falling snow. However, the fact that Gautier creates her macabre word painting in the enclosed space of the pagoda confirms how she associates violence with interiors like the dungeon, castle tower, torture chamber, and geisha house, while underlining her affinity with the decadent that prefers artifice to nature. This exhilarating and oddly humorous scene, (at least for the contemporary reader familiar with the films of Sam Peckinpah or Quentin Tarantino), where statuary becomes the ultimate weapon, illustrates her unique understanding of art as an expression of controlled violence. This notion is repeated in the minute, two-page description of the imperial soldiers preparing for the final battle, their sumptuous, animal-like costumes and resplendent weapons becoming metonymical emblems of terror:

> On voyait briller les cuirasses de cuivres, écaillées comme le dos d'un dragon, et les casques pointus où s'agite un gland de soie rouge...Les Tigres de Guerre...vêtus de maillots jaunes tachetés de noir...Les somptueux Uo-Fous, dont le casque se termine par deux cornes dorées, brandissaient au bout d'une tige en bois de fer leurs haches miroitantes, dites Haches de la Lune. (276)

Hence again, Gautier poeticizes warfare, foregrounding the notion of art as weaponry and weaponry as art.[12]

Interestingly, she creates a similar scene in *Les Mémoires d'un éléphant blanc* (1894), a children's novel set in Siam and India. Here, the narrator, the mighty elephant Irvata, is equipped for war with an ornate costume including steel blades on his trunk and tusks, "des fourreaux d'acier aigus et tranchants" (53). He describes the battle in the following terms: "À partir de ce moment, ce fut un carnage devant moi; je perçais, je tranchais, j'éventrais sur mon passage, des vivants, faisant des morts, pétrissant les cadavres sous mes larges pieds, qui bientôt furent chaussés de sang" (58). In this passage of gory carnage—one totally inappropriate for children, at least by today's "politically correct" standards—we see how great was Gautier's fascination with graphic violence. It is as if she simply cannot resist the temptation of including at least one bloody scene, even in a book destined for children and adolescents![13]

As *Le Dragon impérial* draws to an end, it seems as if the three friends will succeed in their quest to install Ta-Kiang on the throne. Scenes of unspeakable carnage and even cannibalism fill the pages: "Les rebelles, pleines de rage, se ruèrent sur une cité voisine; ils firent rotir tout vifs les jeunes enfants, et les dévorèrent aux yeux de leurs mères, liées douloureusement à des poteaux" (208). However, just when victory seems assured, the enemy prince breaks the spell by uttering the truth. He boldly proclaims that Ta-Kiang is the one who casts the shadow of the imperial dragon (281). The miracle revealed, the tide of the battle immediately turns and the brave usurpers prepare for defeat. The prince's speech act thus triggers the bloody downfall, demonstrating the power

of language to wreck havoc, the power of one utterance to defeat an entire army. The fact that the speech act triggers not only political violence, but also brings about the unraveling of the legend itself and hence the destruction of the sign of the dragon, suggests that violence exists not only outside language but is indeed embedded inside language—a duality mirrored in the poet's violent quest that is at once political and artistic. In this way, Gautier's text explores the potential death of two kinds of representation—the representation that is politics and the representation that is language (Heathcote, Balzac, 38). The combination of spatial, temporal, and formal crossroads of violence again bears witness to what Derrida sees as the "intrusion conjointe de la violence et de l'écriture" (171). The spectacular denouement of *L'Usurpateur* similarly emphasizes "la violence originaire du langage" (Derrida 164). Here, the mighty Japanese warrior Ivakoura, holding the parchment of his beloved's poem, perishes by fire. As he is engulfed by flames, the words on the paper are literally immolated as he reads them for the last time, thereby underlining the notion of poetry as an unleashing of violence (and violence as an unleashing of poetry): "Il prit sur sa poitrine un papier froissé et le déploya. Il le porta à ses lèvres, puis le lut une dernière fois, à la lueur de l'incendie…Le papier brûla tout à coup entre les doigts du prince" (406).

The prince's speech act also brings about the charismatic last stand of the poet, a remarkable scene in which he literally engraves poetry on the forehead of one of his victims. Here, in the gruesome composition of his masterpiece, a *mise en abyme*, Gautier's character dramatically enacts her theory of artistic creation, playing out quite literally the dissociable nature of language and violence. Resigned to political defeat, faced with his own death, he realizes he must harness his violent impulses and focus their powers in order to fulfill his artistic quest. Again, violence is seen as the ultimate creative energy, and his poetic epiphany has to do with the clear realization that he must become its agent. He declares that with the creation of each verse he will kill: "Je tuerai un homme à chaque vers." (185). With bravado, he counts off: "Un!" He marks the first by thrusting his sword into an enemy's eye. "Deux!" A sword in each hand, he takes one step forward, and kills two at once. He takes his time with the last enemy soldier, ("trois, quatre!") he uses his sword to sting and tease, ("cinq!") he engraves a bloody verse of poetry on the forehead, ("six!") he lops off an ear, and finally, with the composition of the last verse, ("sept!") he plunges his sword into the enemy's heart.

Here again, Gautier not only suggests that poetry is born of violence, but the opposite is also true—violence is born of poetry, art literally kills, bringing to mind the adage attributed to Picasso, "Art lets you get away with murder" (Downing 189). The link between art and violence is evidenced in the sword, symbolizing the writer's plume, and is re-explored in the final scene. Here, the poet re-evokes the red/white color motif as he inscribes his philosophical poem on a white wall in the blood of his fellow rebels. In so doing, he underlines the double meaning of "graphic" violence as both "extreme" violence and "written" violence: "Pendant que Ko-Li-Tsin trempant son doigt, comme un pinceau, dans le sang des vaincus, traçait de nobles caractères sur le mur d'une maison, la foule s'était silencieusemenet rapprochée, et lisait" (311). His hand is thus compared to a paintbrush and blood, the ultimate emblem of violence, becomes oil paint or watercolor, the human body itself an artistic medium. This scene harkens back to the torture episode, when his fingers spouted blood, causing him to create poetry. As he prepares to die, the Chinese and Tartar enemies are finally brought together through mutual admiration of his work, suggesting that the highest goal of the writer is to co-opt and poeticize violence, thereby converting it into material for constructive repair and reconciliation of the community (311). No wonder the poet's final expression on his decapitated head is a smiling one. He knows he has at last written his masterpiece.

Daughter of one of the most prominent writers of the century, wife of a prolific poet and editor, and collaborator with or rumored lover of Richard Wagner, Victor Hugo, John Singer Sargent, and Pierre Loti, Judith Gautier was clearly much more than the sum of her many personal relationships (Yu, *Alabaster,* 464). Many contemporaries regarded her as a knowledgeable Sinologist, despite the fact that she never visited the country of her particular fascination (Rubins 146-147). Because her work is based on information derived from her readings at the Bibliothèque Impériale, it is primarily a mixture of facts and abstract interpretations of Oriental culture. As such, it should be regarded largely as an imaginative transposition of Asia. In a manner comparable to that of the narrator of the Arabian *A Thousand and One Nights*, Gautier delighted in recreating in her imagination the deeds of Asiatic princesses, mighty warriors, beautiful courtesans, and breathtaking, exotic landscapes. Indeed, her fertile imagination was her "magic carpet" (Mirham 175).

Clearly, she defies categorization, which may explain her fall into oblivion as a fiction writer. A rare female in an almost exclusively male group of Orientalists, she stands out in her lifelong fascination with what she understood as a specifically Eastern combination of elegance and brutality. She is also unique among women writers in the epic dimensions of her fiction and in the fusing of art and violence in unusual characters like the warrior-poet and the learned, suicidal geisha. Her depiction of the joy and exhilaration of hand-to-hand combat takes us back to the chanson de geste. Her love of exotic cultures and championing of qualities associated with the medieval quest place her among the Romantics, while her hyper-aestheticization of violence places her among her decadent contemporaries like Aubrey Beardsley, Rachilde, and Octave Mirbeau. Her penchant for verbal craftsmanship and descriptiveness combined with her aspiration to an authentic restoration of Oriental cultures show her affinity for the Parnassians (Rubins 147). Her vast, skillful descriptions of epic battles and elaborate costumes bring to mind, for today's film viewers, Akira Kurosawa, while her gore combined with dark humor anticipates today's film auteur, Quentin Tarantino. As the year 2011 marked the bicentennial of her father's birth, it is high time we rediscover his extraordinarily talented daughter Judith, whose unusual, poetic novels constantly consolidate and confirm the inseparable links between violence and representation.

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Notes

[1] Her unhappy marriage to Mendès lasted from 1866 until 1878 when they were granted a judicial separation, though they had been separated unofficially since 1874. Since her husband was often in financial difficulties, she supported both of them throughout much of the marriage, launching a second career as a music and art critic for leading newspapers. Their divorce was granted in 1896 and Mendès was ordered to pay all the costs. (Richardson 167).

[2] She was elected to the Goncourt Academy, over Paul Claudel and Léon Bloy, in October 1910, and appointed to the Legion of Honor in January 1911 (Richardson 223 and 233). Hurt and disillusioned after her marriage, she remained deeply suspicious of men and wary of lasting emotional commitment. Although she had an affair with Victor Hugo, she did not encourage Richard Wagner's passionate advances. His influence was perhaps in the epic dimensions of his music—dimensions she admired and emulated in *Le Dragon impérial* and *L'Usurpateur*. For fresh insights into her art criticism, see Guentner, Chapter 8.

[3] Charles Clermont-Ganneau, who was to become a professor at the Collège de France, taught her Persian (Mihram 171).

[4] See Rubins (147-48) and Daniel's chapter "La Chine au Parnasse."

[5] Interestingly, Gautier wrote her *Livre de jade* at a time when there existed no textbook and only two grammar manuals of the Chinese language in France, one of which treated exclusively the spoken tongue (Détrie 305). According to Yu, for more than half a century, Gautier's volume "served, both directly and indirectly, as the general European public's primary access to Chinese poetry. That this can be said of a work produced by a twenty-two-year-old woman, a genuine amateur, constitutes a remarkable tale of literary influence" (*Travels,* 218-19).

[6] For articles treating her autobiography see Schick. For articles treating *Le Livre de jade*, see Détrie, Rubins, and Yu.

[7] Some of the pseudonyms were "Judith Walter" and "F. Chaulnes." See "Select Bibliography" in Richardson (285-293).

[8] For the only work devoted to her novels, see Goldsmith. For works largely biographical in nature, see Caws, Jessome-Nance, Knapp, and Richardson.

[9] The novel that contains Western characters is *La Conquête du Paradis*, a historical novel dealing with France's occupation of southern India in the eighteenth century (Knapp 1). The title underlines Gautier's interest in exotic places suffering the consequences of violent Western intrusion.

[10] Here too, she is much indebted to her father. It was Théophile who saw to it that the prestigious publisher Lemerre published her novel, *Le Dragon impérial* in 1869 (Knapp 78).

[11] See the Internet articles "Blood: the mother of qi" and "Symbolism of Colours."

[12] Gautier's exhaustive description of warriors' costumes is reminiscent of her father's description of Nyssia's jeweled apparel in his Egyptian tale *Le Roi Candaule* (1844), and points forward to similar depictions in Huysmans' *À rebours* (1884) and in the paintings of Gustave Moreau.

[13] *Les Mémoires d'un éléphant blanc* (1894) was until quite recently the only one of her novels still in print. It was republished in 2003. Fortunately, Garnier is republishing her complete works, (volume I came out in November of 2011).

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