As a young man, the aspiring poet Abu Nuwas sought out Walibah, an established master, known for his blond hair. The two met, and then retired to the older poet’s house for a repast. Poets being what they are, one thing led to another.

“[A]fter they drank and ate,” according to the best available account of that evening, “Walibah wanted him. When he disrobed him and saw the beauty of his body, he could not but kiss him on the anus. Abu Nuwas fainted. So he said to him ‘What is this, sly boy?’ He answered, ‘I did not want the known proverb to be lost and not to come true, namely: The penalty for he who kisses the anus is its farts.’”


Joseph Massad teaches Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University, and his book looks back over what was more than a millennium of homoerotic Arabic poems, in which Abu Nuwas’s name was often invoked. But the tradition faltered in the 19th century, as a new skittishness over same-sex desire settled over Arabic intellectual and religious discussions. The 13th-century biography was republished in Cairo in 1924 – and then banned by Egypt’s...
British-mandate government. In 1968, an Egyptian journalist published a book titled The Confessions of Abu Nuwas. The story of the poet’s encounter with his mentor is retold. Only in this rendition, Walibah tries to rape Abu Nuwas at dagger-point and the young poet chooses death over submission.

In part to find out how 9th-century flirting became 20th-century rape, Massad focuses on the last 150 years of Arabic writings that touch on same-sex desire – from literary criticism to memoirs, travelogues to a sex manual, novels to police reports.

There’s a whole bookshelf on homosexuality and Islam. Yet now there’s almost a fatwa on the head of the Columbia professor – put there not by upright imams but in the name of outraged gays. Why the controversy over his work?

The colon-ized take it up the ass

Massad’s overarching theme is that Europe’s encroachment on the Middle East – Napoleon’s aborted invasion of Egypt in 1798 is the opening salvo – poured acid rain on the Arabs’ literary legacy of same-sex eros. Western conquest has had that unsavory effect, Massad contends, whether the interlopers were Victorian-era colonial administrators, European scholars unearthing and systematizing ancient Arabic texts, gay tourists on sexcapades, or Western human-rights groups and the gay campaigners that he contemptuously dubs the “Gay International.” Indeed, these latter Massad accuses of being a sometimes witting tool of Western imperialism. Moreover, he says, they do no favors for erotic freedom in the Middle East.

With a steady drumbeat of bad news coming out of the region, Massad’s accusation leaves some gay activists smarting. In the past few months alone, Kuwait has launched a campaign against cross-dressers, Cairo has put eight men up on charges of “habitual debauchery,” and Iran has executed a 20-year-old on (recanted) accusations of forced sex with other boys when he himself was 13.

Groups such as Human Rights Watch and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (both based in New York) have taken the lead in documenting and publicizing these cases. Massad hits at the gay movement just where it would seem the most selfless – not fighting at home for marriage or pension rights but working abroad for the benefit of, as such groups put it, less privileged GLBT people who have no voice.

An Uzi in your pocket?

Even before Desiring Arabs, Joseph Massad was already Columbia’s most controversial professor. He’s been the target of a national campaign – led by Zionist groups such as Campus Watch and the David Project – that seeks to have him fired. In 2002 a student accused Massad of responding harshly to a comment she made in class. The administration set up a faculty panel to investigate. In a documentary, Columbia Unbecoming, another student contends that Massad taught that the root of “Zionism” is “zayin” – Hebrew slang for “penis.”

Massad disputes the charges. The shared root he was calling attention to was between “zayin” and the Hebrew word for weapon, he says, and had nothing to do with the etymology of “Zionism.” And the other accusations have not come to much. In March 2005, the panel decided he had “responded heatedly” in a way that “exceeded commonly accepted bounds,” though testimony from students who witnessed the exchange came down 20-to-two in his favor.

In any case, a controversy over classroom manners seems a bit rich given the standards of politesse Columbia establishes at the top: in introducing Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad last September, university president Lee Bollinger called the Iranian leader to his face “a petty and cruel dictator.” With the question of Massad’s tenure still hanging, outside pressure continues. A November 20 New York Post op-ed piece titled “Hatemonger U” urged Columbia to fire the professor. “After 9/11, we simply can’t leave Middle East studies to partisans,” declared Richard Miniter.

For other reasons, some gay activists have agreed.

In that speech at Columbia, Ahmadinejad had declared, “In Iran, we don’t have homosexuals like in your country” – which, depending on what “like” means, could be partly true. Writing in the New Republic, James Kirchik accused Ahmadinejad of intending that claim in its widest and absurdest sense, and imagined that Massad was in the audience nodding right along. “Massad’s intellectual project,” Kirchik said, “is a not-so-tacit apology for the oppression of people who identify openly as homosexual. In so doing, he sides with
Islamist regimes over Islamic liberals.”

Wayne Besen, a former spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, was harsher, calling on Columbus to cast out “a dangerous ideologue [who] is part of a larger movement to justify the brutal repression and murder of gay people in the Middle East.”

Dark and degenerate

Massad would seem hard to cast in the role of PR man for Islamic fundamentalism. He’s a leftish academic whose background is Palestinian Christian – like that of Edward Said, Massad’s mentor. *Desiring Arabs* is dedicated to Said, who died in 2003 and also taught at Columbia. Said’s work focused on how colonization dehumanizes its subjects. He’s best known for his 1978 book *Orientalism*. The title word gestures at a stylized Western view of the East: as exotic, timeless, backward, cruel, readily generalized, and needing stern Occidental discipline.

*Orientalism’s* cover showed an 1870 painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme of a nude boy, a serpent entwining his body, and an elderly snake charmer at his side. Miscellaneous disheveled natives lie crumpled against a wall watching enrapt. It’s a charged image of illicit desire, which Gérôme simultaneously indulges, rejects, and projects onto degenerate Arabs. Said’s book in fact dealt little with questions of eroticism. Massad’s new work unpacks *Orientalism’s* promise of a sexual critique of colonialism.

Massad contends metaphors of sex and degeneracy shaped Europe’s encounter with Islam, all beamed through the lens of social Darwinism. As well, these metaphors increasingly focused Arab self-perception. In 1886, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani – deemed the father of Islamic modernism – embraced the notion that the Muslim world was for now lower on the evolutionary scale, but looked forward to its “breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of Western society.”

The Ottoman Empire was famously called “the sick man of Europe.” Massad argues that the Ottomans and their Arab subjects were, to Western eyes, “queer” as well. That is, they were seen in their foreignness in the way sex deviants at home were cast as radically “other.” Muslims were queer, Massad shows, in the ripest Freudian terms, which would paint homosexuality as regressed, neurotic, narcissistic, and unevolved. It’s a self-perception secular Arab thinkers have also taken to heart, especially after the 1967 war with Israel, and the dream of Arab nationalism that getting Massad in trouble with gays. It’s his contention that when Western gay groups mess around in Muslim societies’ affairs, they’re like colonizing missionaries, fired by moral superiority and a keen sense of White Man’s Burden.

Massad is working against the grain of Arabs who have, in some cases, pinned their own stripe onto the rainbow flag. The Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society (Glas.org), for example, was established in 1988 and claims chapters in New York, Los Angeles, Beirut, and Cairo.

“Since the concept of same-sex relations does not exist in the Arab world, being ‘gay’ is still considered to be sexual behavior,” asserts Ramzi Zakharia, GLAS’s outreach director. “Just because you sleep with a member of the same sex does not mean you are gay. Once a relationship develops beyond sex (i.e., love), this is when the term ‘gay’ applies.”

Massad does not dispute that some Arabs embrace gay identity. But he contends they hail from the increasingly westernized elites. “They remain a minuscule minority among those men who engage in same-sex relations and who do not identify as ‘gay’ nor express a need for gay politics,” Massad argues. The evidence, he suggests, includes Zakharia’s care in distinguishing “gay love” from “gay sex,” pointing to a world where same-sex activity is a commonplace without name or label.

“According to Western press accounts, most men and women who seek same-sex contact in Saudi Arabia,” notes Massad, citing the extreme case of the Islam’s most puritanical country, “are very successful at it and don’t seem to be harassed.” It’s a seeming contradiction that, lately, has received a lot of notice (see “Arabian Nights,” *The Guide*, July 2007).

In part what permits the impossible is a general reserve that Islam encour-
ages in matters of the body. Etiquette frowns on strutting naked around a hammam in Fez. By contrast, consider the American locker room.

“Men can stand naked in front of one another and speak about politics and jobs,” Massad says, “while making sure, of course, that their gaze stays at eye level.” It’s as if, he adds, heterosexuality is assured by solid-gold genetics that nothing can trump. “In Arab countries – and in many other cultures – nudity is frowned upon because it’s seen as seductive and productive of desire. So there’s a recognition that the desire exists and that it’s natural.”

Even if recognition doesn’t mean embrace, Islam isn’t inconsistent: heterosexual desire is treated with the same reserve.

Other factors that help preserve a space for same-sex practice in the Muslim context include the non-equation of desire with identity, a regard for privacy, and veiling of sex’s public expression. There’s compensation for this in part by something that still surprises Western visitors to Muslim lands: a ready acceptance of same-sex public affection, with men or boys who are friends walking everywhere arm in arm.

**Riverboat aflame**

But what happens when silence breaks down into noise?

Massad deconstructs the 2001 Queen Boat incident in Egypt – perhaps the most notorious Arab anti-gay crackdown. On May 11 of that year, Cairo police arrested 55 men in and around the Queen Boat, a floating disco docked on the Nile in an upscale neighborhood. Women and Western tourists were released immediately, with three sons of prominent families let go shortly after. Prosecutors charged 52 men, who were claimed to be members of an Abu Nuwas “cult.” The alleged crime was not homosexuality (which is not itself illegal) but “offending religion.” A year later, 23 were tried and convicted in a special state-security court normally reserved for cases against Islamists. The men were sentenced to between one and five years, often at hard labor.

The case became an international cause célèbre. Openly-gay U.S. Representative Barney Frank helped rally members of Congress to threaten a cut off of the annual billions of dollars in U.S. aid to Egypt unless the men were released. Western diplomats and media, Massad notes, are “usually silent about most human rights abuses in Egypt, as well as the poverty that afflicts the country.” But Westerners attended the Queen Boat trials in force, and publicly expressed their horror at the proceedings.

Seen through the lens of domestic Egyptian politics, Massad contends, that horror was turned on its head. The Egyptian regime enjoys little legitimacy at home and stays in power through rigged elections, U.S. aid, and an iron fist. As in many societies where opposition is criminalized, dissent takes a religious cover. In Egypt, that’s in the form of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The U.S. pays for Egypt’s undemocratic ruling elite and heavy hand in part because it keeps Islamic fundamentalists at bay.

Impoverished Egyptians suffer the consequences. It’s their sons who are suspect as Brotherhood conspirators. As a result, they bear the brunt of not infrequent mass arrests (especially before elections), and who suffer torture, trials, and imprisonment – meted out in the special security courts that handled the Queen Boat defendants.

The U.S. underwrites Egypt’s torture apparatus as part of its war on terror. So some Arab eyes rolled when Scott Long, Human Rights Watch’s point man on gay issues, demanded in 2004 that the U.S. institute a GLBT sensitivity component in its training programs for Egyptian police.

Even if it caused static with Egypt’s American paymaster, the Queen Boat prosecution marked the Egyptian government’s discovery that fomenting anti-homosexual hysteria is a game at which it can only win.

The prosecutions coopted the opposition’s theme of Islamic probity while appealing to class resentments. The defendants were an economic cut above – with many of them tracked by the trail they left on the Internet at the English-language GayEgypt.com. Getting online in English is something, of course, beyond the wherewithal of Cairo slum-
Arab cultural self-confidence took a hit when Western colonizers replaced the Ottomans. But, Joseph Massad suggests in his new book *Desiring Arabs*, that in itself didn’t change the ample space for same-sex relations that Arab societies often allow.

An Egyptian chronicler of Napoleon’s 1798 invasion – one of the first European forays into the Middle East since the Crusades – wrote about being impressed with French scientific interests, but was hardly wowed by a more personal measure of their civilization. “Whenever a Frenchman has to perform an act of nature he does so, wherever he happens to be, even in full view of people, and he goes away as he is, without washing his private parts after defecation,” noted Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti. “If he is a man of taste and refinement he wipes himself with whatever he finds, even with a paper with writing on it; otherwise he remains as he is.”

A Moroccan writer touring France in 1845 wrote with disgust about streets flowing with men’s piss. He also expressed with surprise that, “for them, only flirtation, rhapsody, and courtship with women exist, for they are not inclined toward young men and juveniles, as for them this is a great shame and merits punishment, even though it be with mutual consent.”

But increasingly, the elite Arab who got to tour Europe found its censure of same-sex doings admirably modern. Egyptian al-Tahtawi called it “one of the better things among their traits.” Western-introduced printing and an onslaught of Orientalist scholarship meant more historic Arabic literature was published and exposed to a wider readership. But it also meant new pressure to censor what, in the light of European opinion, now felt unseemly. Compilations of Abu Nuwas’s poetry would now be printed with the boy-love poems removed. (Censorship which continues: In 2001 the Egyptian Ministry of Culture blocked the planned publication of the poet’s complete extant works.) An academic debate ensued in Arabic as to whether the poet’s depravity had roots in a warping surfeit of dancing girls in Abbasid Baghdad, the poet’s Persian blood, or his absent father.

But these intellectual discussions didn’t exactly transform ordinary life, even at the upper echelons where they raged. The major 20th-century Egyptian writer Taha Husayn remembered his schooldays at Cairo’s elite al-Azhar University at the turn of the century. Some of his fellow students were conservative, he wrote, but others (“more fortunate”) were “renewers” or “Nuwasites.” For these “readers of the poetry of Abu Nuwas and his companions,” it “was not prohibited for them to encounter beautiful faces inside and outside of al-Azhar.”

Or, perhaps, to encounter them in their beds. Massad writes: “Husayn had one more reference to same-sex practice when he was at al-Azhar at the age of 13 (in 1902), namely, in reference to a young man dubbed ‘Abu Tartur,’ who was said to pay periodic nocturnal visits to the apartment of al-Azhar students (who were invariably a few years older than Husayn). The young man would slip into their beds and assume the passive position in coitus with them. While Husayn refrained from any graphic description of what actually transpired under the bed covers, he would explain how the young men would have to get up afterwards and bathe, which was an arduous task in winter for lack of hot water in the apartments. The young men would from time to time speak about Abu Tartur in ‘quick furtive whispers followed by quick chuckles interrupted by shyness and reserve.’ Abu Tartur would choose a different student each time. It is unclear and perhaps unlikely that he visited the young Taha, even though the latter would ‘reflect’ upon what the young men would say about Abu Tartur.”

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“During the hearings,” notes Massad, “the prosecution frequently referenced the Gay International campaign, pledged to defend the ‘manhood’ of Egypt against attempts to ‘violate’ it, and wondered what would become of a nation who sits by idly as its ‘men become like its women’ through ‘deviance.’”

Seeing the traction they were gaining, authorities upped the ante. “The press and conservative Islamists soon began to call for explicit laws criminalizing same-sex practice,” he adds. A wave of further arrests followed.

The response from the West was “largely responsible for the intensity of this repressive campaign,” Massad contends. “Despite the overwhelming evidence that gayness, as a choice, is proving to bring about more repression, not ‘liberation,’ and less sexual freedom rather than more for Arab men practicing same-sex contact, the Gay International is undeterred in its missionary campaign.”

For an interview with Joseph Massad, go to Guidemag.com/temp/massad.html