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## **Cosmopolitan: A Tale of Identity from Ottoman Alexandria**

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Common Knowledge

Duke University Press

Volume 11, Issue 3, Fall 2005

pp. 393-409

ARTICLE

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Cosmopolitan** **A Tale of Identity from Ottoman Alexandria**

*Maya Jasanoff (bio)*

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July 20, 1767, Alexandria, Egypt: a muggy season, when haze mutes the sun and the sea sits flat. Around noon, Etienne Roboly walks to the old

port, northwest along the great curve of the harbor. He is the chief dragoman, or interpreter, for the French consulate, and has lived in Egypt for some thirty years. He knows the place about as well as anyone. As dragoman, Roboly not only interprets between French, Turkish, and Arabic (the word *dragoman* is derived from the Arabic verb "to translate") but often conducts negotiations with Ottoman and Egyptian authorities himself. Well-versed in local protocols, and deeply acquainted with the customs agents, Roboly also dabbles in private commercial ventures of his own: trading, and sometimes smuggling, through Alexandria with the help of collaborators in other Mediterranean entrepôts.

This has been a difficult summer in Alexandria. Fever, which visits the city with nearly annual regularity, is rife. Demands and extortionate taxes (known as "avanas") from the port officials are becoming more frequent and more appalling. Westerners are moving cautiously. All this the dragoman knows. But in his long Turkish-style robes, the usual clothing for men of his profession, Roboly attracts no notice. He, at least, should be safe. Then suddenly there is a hand on his shoulder. It is the hand of a well-dressed Turk, who knows Roboly's name, his business, and some of his acquaintances in Constantinople. Is the man a friend of a friend? Roboly walks on further with him. Within minutes, catastrophe is upon **[End Page 393]** him. The Turk, it turns out, is an officer of the sultan, armed with an order issued by the grand vizier to arrest the dragoman. Roboly is beaten, abused, and dragged on board the Ottoman ship *Reala*, where he is imprisoned in chains.

I read about this incident in a letter from the French consul in Alexandria to his superiors in Versailles, bound up in a volume of diplomatic correspondence in the Archives Nationales in Paris.<sup>1</sup> I was researching cultural exchange on imperial frontiers; I had encountered Roboly earlier in my readings, and my curiosity had been piqued by this character who seemed (not least because of his occupation) the very type of a "marginal" European, seeking out overseas opportunities. Before I could read on, the archive closed for the day, and I was on tenterhooks wondering about the rest of the story. Why was the dragoman arrested?

What happened to him next? I would soon discover that his life story held greater relevance to questions of nation, empire, and identity than I had anticipated.

I had been drawn to these volumes in the first place because I was curious about the origins of European imperial desire in Ottoman Egypt. Inspired in part by Edward Said, who famously identified the French invasion of Egypt (1798–1801) as the launchpad of modern Orientalism, I wanted to turn the page back to the period *before* the French invasion. Looking to these decades, when European ambitions were only beginning to take shape, and when Europeans constituted a small and relatively weak minority in Ottoman domains, helped to frame questions of culture and power in different terms. In the dispatches and memoranda of French diplomats—documents rarely consulted by cultural historians—I found not so much the foreshadowings of Orientalist discourse as repeated evidence of the cross-cultural relations that formed part of daily life for French nationals living in an Eastern, Muslim, imperial domain. The consular records were a treasure trove of incidents and encounters: adultery, madness, murder, apostasy, antiquities, the drunken escapades of French sailors on shore, or the regular *avarias* levied against French commerce by Ottoman authorities. The lines between empowered and powerless, even East and West, did not always seem clearly drawn; nor did individuals' allegiances necessarily fit neatly within the borders between cultures or nations. Roboly's story in particular, as it unfolded in the dispatches, cast the ambiguities of national versus imperial identity into relief. It underscored the point that empires—while they develop hierarchies and rhetorics of difference—also contain considerable potential for crossing and cosmopolitan...

## COSMOPOLITAN

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### A Tale of Identity from Ottoman Alexandria

*Maya Jasanoff*

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