The Treasures of Aladdin: Orientalizing the Mining Frontier

By Richard Francaviglia

In 1849, as news about the discovery of gold in California spread rapidly, people sought ways to describe the fabulous placer deposits found there. Although the prospect of finding large quantities of free gold in the streambeds was intoxicating, some skeptical observers urged caution. Believing that it was both too easy and very unwise to get caught up in fanciful stories about gold mining in the Far West, Felix Paul Wierzbicki wrote a stern warning.

In *California As It Is, and As It May Be* (1849), Wierzbecki noted that "heretofore we have heard nothing but Arabian Nights stories about the gold region, drawn, if possible, with more vivid colors than even the Asiatic fancy could conjure up." Although Wierzbicki recognized that "the whole civilized world is electrified with these surprising stories," he urged readers to remember that "even our government at home had not received an official account from its subordinates here, that represent the truth in its simple garb." Still, as Wierzbicki concluded, thousands of otherwise rational people "were content to seize upon a few remarkable cases" and rush to California from far-flung "regions of the earth."[1]

Wierzbicki erred on the side of caution, but many other writers soon used the same "Asiatic fancy" stories to confirm that an almost inconceivable amount of gold awaited travelers in the Sierra Nevada foothills. In 1850, for example, British writer G. A. Fleming noted that when a group of people in California "rode from camp to camp, and saw the hoards of gold, some of it in flakes, but the greater part in coarse dust . . . it seemed as if the fabled treasures of the Arabian Nights had suddenly been realized before them."[2]

Fleming substantiated the common belief that treasures rivaling those in the *Arabian Nights* stories were there for the taking. As the popular writings of Wierzbicki and Fleming suggest, the stories from the

Arabian Nights provided a glimpse of what might happen to seemingly rational people when fabulous mineral wealth suddenly appeared. It might be wise to be skeptical about such mineral wealth, but then again it might be best to throw caution to the wind and rush headlong to the place where such treasure beckons.

One story from the *Arabian Nights*—"Aladdin and the Magic Lamp"—became a common metaphor for the discovery of immense wealth on the western frontier. The belief that Aladdin's fortunes and misfortunes could play out in even more distant locales is evident from early 1850s Chile, which was recognized as a treasure trove of metals such as silver, gold, and copper. In describing the early mining development of northern Chile, U. S. Navy Lt. James Melville Gilliss noted that "the products of mines in Atacama almost make one believe the genii of Aladdin have still their favored mortals on the earth, one of them having yielded its proprietor more than half a million of dollars!"

After describing the mineral wealth of Atacama in some detail, Gilliss related the story of the proprietor who had become so rich, Juan Godoi. Silver was the main lure in this part of Chile, and Godoi had found and developed a rich mine. Just as Godoi's mining investments began paying off handsomely, however, he squandered his newfound wealth and was soon forced to sell his mining properties in order to avoid complete ruin. As Gilliss put it, "Alas! poor Godoi, thine was not the wonderful instrument of Aladdin!" According to Gilliss, the unfortunate Godoi "awoke one morning as poor as he was a few months before, and bitterly lamenting how unreal are dreams." Gilliss concluded this tale of woe by soberly noting that "Godoi shortly afterwards died, leaving a bare subsistence for his family."[3] Godoi's only tangible legacy is a small mining town in the Chilean desert bearing his name, but the name Aladdin is still associated with abundant adventure, spectacular luck, and immense wealth.

It is no accident that the fanciful stories in the *Arabian Nights* were commonly employed to describe mineral wealth on the nineteenth-century mining frontier. These stories resonated at that time because the United States had no ready metaphors of its own for the soon-to-be-discovered fabulous mineral wealth of the Far West. Given the popularity in the United States at the time of Asiatic fantasy stories about the wealth of the Orient, it is no surprise that they served as a model. Even though both the Spanish and English had long searched for the mythical "El Dorado" in South America,[4] the *Arabian Nights* treasures seemed more apt.

In contrast to the fabled El Dorado, in which the Spainards were dependent upon the native peoples' knowledge of, and possession of, local mineral resources, California's riches were discovered by European Americans themselves and seemed pretty much free for the taking. Even though Anglo Americans in California would soon became more familiar with Spanish and Mexican mining and miners, and would use Spanish terms such as "El Dorado" and "bonanza" to describe mining ventures, it was the *Arabian Nights* that first came to mind when gold was discovered in the Far West in 1848.

To show how and why *Arabian Nights* stories were so readily employed as a template for what would transpire on the mining frontier, the story "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" must first be placed in both literary and historical context. The ready reference to Aladdin was, in part, a result of both European and American culture's Orientalism, a powerful force in literary circles at the time and rapidly becoming part of a broader popular culture.[5]

Orientalism originally referred to study of, or intense interest in, the Orient. That region includes both the Near East and the Far East, as the Middle East and Asia were then commonly called, as well as Asia Minor and the subcontinent of India. Western—that is, European and American—engagement with the Orient was often passionate, and was linked to romanticism and political ex-

pansion during the era of colonialism.

Although Orientalism is now commonly associated with imperialism and racism by scholars—no doubt partly due to the publication of Edward Said's highly critical book *Orientalism*[6] in 1979—it should be understood that the term was once widely used to mean an appreciation of things and peoples from the Orient. Although Said's scholarship emphasized Orientalism's tendency to appropriate the East, Orientalism is in fact far more complex than mere exploitation. Historically, Europeans and Americans found much to admire in the Orient, as the term "cradle of civilization" suggests. Despite this appreciation and fascination, however, many westerners held the contemporary Orient in low regard, seeing it as a place of cruel and barbaric despotism and superstitious faiths.

In reality, Europeans and Americans were, and are, ambivalent about the Orient. If the peoples of the Orient possess different beliefs and values, and this might make them suspect, the richness and appeal of these exotic cultures were also undeniable. So, too, was the appeal of the Orient's distant locales, such as Egypt, India, China, and Siam. In one of its numerous definitions, Orientalism is the "imitation or assimilation of that which is Oriental"—including Oriental religion, art, philosophy or literature. The tales of the *Arabian Nights* fit into the last category. Imitation and assimilation suggest that the stories of Aladdin could be incorporated into western culture, and that is exactly what happened in the nineteenth century. Imitation also suggests an appreciation of the original, as is evident in how eagerly Americans read about the Orient and purchased items made there.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the *Arabian Nights* had become common reading for adults and bedtime reading for children. Also known as *One Thousand and One Nights*, this collection of stories is Persian in origin and features a young woman named Shahrazad (also spelled Scheherazade) in the role of narrator. Shahrazad is in a special position to tell these stories, for she is one of many virgins brought to a king so cruel and barbaric that he married one woman each day, spent the night with that particular wife, only to kill her the next day.

Shahrazad however, experienced a different fate. During her first night with the king, she began to tell the him such an enchanting story that he was compelled to let her continue it, night after night, for 1,001 nights. After this time, nearly three years, the king decided to free Shahrazad, a reminder that good storytelling was highly valued and a good story teller rewarded. In the nineteenth century, the name Shahrazad was widely recognized as the intelligent and lucky woman of Oriental fantasies.

The stories in *One Thousand and One Nights* feature spellbinding tales of mystery, wonder, cruelty, and magic that have nearly universal appeal. Although Islamic culture in the Arab world tended to transmit these stories orally—that is, freely spreading them as folklore—Europeans had no reservations about writing them down and marketing them to an eager public. Through an aggressive publishing industry, these stories were consumed by readers in Europe and the United States.

The French, who introduced Orientalism to Europe, were the first to transcribe *One Thousand and One Nights*. Antoine Galland (1646–1714) originally published the tales in 1704, but several English versions were published in London in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the early nineteenth century, these were also called "Persian Tales" in both England and the United States. As *One Thousand and One Nights* became a bestseller in the United States, it helped define a mystical, mysterious, treasure-laden East to enchanted readers. It also helped lay the groundwork for placing the mineral wealth of the Americas in a decidedly Asiatic context.

By 1850, the *Arabian Nights* had become a best seller in several languages, often published in many editions to meet the public's insatiable

interest in the fantastic tales therein. Ultimately, the 1880s editions, transcribed and annotated by consummate Orientalist Sir Richard F. Burton (1821–90), became the most popular, in part because Burton's extensive travels in the Middle East had positioned him as an authority on the Orient. Burton's edition, however, supplemented earlier versions that had long appealed to the public.[7]

In retrospect, mid-nineteenth century California proved the perfect place to apply the stories from the *Arabian Nights* and other literature about the Orient to what was happening in real life. California's fair climate and exotic scenery made it easy to romanticize and to conflate with the Middle East. Sidney Smith understood this when he wrote a revealing explanation of the new state's almost magical powers. California in 1850, as Smith put it, was "notoriously the region of gold, and also of that most desperate of all classes of men, gold finders." Smith waxed poetic about what awaited the traveler in the Golden State:

> To the bold and intrepid, to all who are imbued with the spirit of adventure, to that frame of mind which is essentially gipsy, Kalmuck, and Arabian in its desire for a wandering and restless life, these regions offer the inducement of a climate which admits of constantly living in the open air, of productiveness which renders rough subsistence easy with little labour, and of the chances of getting rapidly rich by the lucky acquisition of the precious metals.[8]

Equating the Far West with the Orient was part of a long tradition of plumbing classical literature and the Bible to find similarities between those two parts of the world. The 1852 introduction to John Charles Frémont's *Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Oregon and California*, for example, noted that "in the sunny clime of the south west [*sic*]—in Upper California—may be found the modern Canaan, a land 'flowing with milk and honey,' its mountains studded and its rivers lined and choked with gold."[9]

Authorities such as Smith and Frémont implied that California's mineral wealth was there for the taking. The idea that relatively little labor would be needed to possess this wealth is noteworthy, for such descriptions require someone to take advantage of the bounty openly waiting to be exploited. For a generation of individuals familiar with the stories in the *Arabian Nights* it was none other than Aladdin himself, described as a ne'er do well, who would serve as the model of meteoric rise to fame and fortune. Aladdin became the prototype: an individual of humble origins destined to become wealthy with little physical or mental effort. The secret lies in not only being able to seize opportunity, but also the heady prospect of being showered by almost inconceivably good luck.

Like a fortunate miner on the frontier, Aladdin was obligated to find his wealth far from home by traveling to a distant land, namely China. This exotic geographic locale is significant, for resources closer to home are likely to be well known and already exploited, while those of distant lands tantalize. Significantly, though, it took more than good luck for Aladdin to succeed. It was, in fact, magic that helped Aladdin to discover his good fortune. After rubbing a ring given to him by a mysterious and sinister magician—variously called the Darwaysh from the Maghrib or the "Moorman from Inner Marocco [*sic*]"—Aladdin descends into a Chinese cave where he discovers a magic lamp that had been lost there. The presence of the cave is significant, as the story ultimately involves locating treasure underground. Then, too, the lamp illuminates the darkness, as does the miners' lamp.

Deep underground, Aladdin finds a garden containing trees festooned with fruit that are, in fact, gemstones. As Sir Richard Burton's translation goes, "all these trees bare [i.e., bore] for fruitage costly gems; moreover, each had its own kind of growth and jewels of its own peculiar sort; and

these were of every colour, green, and white; yellow, red and other brilliant hues and the radiance flashing from these stones paled the rays of the sun in forenoon sheen." These stones were not only of superb quality, but "the size of each stone so far surpassed description that no King of the Kings of the world owned a single gem equal to the larger sort nor could boast of even one half the size of the smaller kind of them."[10]

Like James Marshall, blithely working in the mill race at Sutter's Saw Mill in 1848, Aladdin stumbled upon this treasure more or less by accident. Marshall, it should be recalled, suspected he had found gold but relied on the expertise of an assayer to confirm the value of his discovery.

Aladdin also needed someone to verify what he had found. As Shahrazad continues her story, she notes that "Aladdin walked amongst the trees" which ". . . in lieu of common fruits and produce" bore ". . . mighty fine jewels and precious stones, such as emeralds and diamonds, rubies, spinels and balasses, pearls and similar gems astounding the mental vision of man." For his part, though, Aladdin did not recognize the stones' value; he simply "fancied that all these jewels were of glass or crystal." Fortuitously, however, Aladdin collected "a portion of these glass jewels for playthings at home." Furthermore, after returning to his village, Aladdin encounters a (Jewish) merchant who swindles him out of gold and silver he has also collected, but, luckily, he is able to recover these after their true value is authenticated by an honest (Muslim) merchant. Note here that Aladdin, as the finder of not only the stones but also of the gold and silver, needs someone to verify their authenticity.

With the value of his treasure now verified, Aladdin soon uses it for a down payment on the object of his dreams, a beautiful princess named Badr al-Budur (sometimes written Badroulbadour) whom he hopes to marry. Somewhat paradoxically, she lives in far-away China with her father the king, or Sultan, even though China was and is not an Islamic country and was not ruled by Sultans! This suggests a more probable location closer to northern India or Pakistan or perhaps Kashmir. At any rate, although the Sultan is impressed with Aladdin's gemstones, he demands more jewels for a dowry. Undaunted, Aladdin simply uses a genie to recover more of the gems, amassing a fortune that charms the Sultan, and assures Aladdin's marriage to the princess.

Through such magic, in fact, Aladdin returns with not only more jewels, but also large quantities of gold. For good measure, and to prove his worth, Aladdin also saw fit to possess an entourage of slaves. However, he was also generous, sharing some of his treasure with the locals. By so doing, Aladdin became wildly popular and well respected. This is noteworthy, for Aladdin's story is ultimately about increasing one's social status by obtaining wealth from underground and spending it generously. As such, Aladdin's story was the perfect metaphor for what might occur, and hopefully would occur, to those who found riches on the mining frontier.

Like Aladdin, most miners had no interest in staying in the remote foreign locale where treasures were found; rather, they hoped to return to civilization as rich men whose status would be the envy of all. At various times in the story, Aladdin summons a genie; in fact there are several in the story, hence the plural "genii" is commonly used. To fulfill one of his dreams, Aladdin asks a genie build him a fabulous pavilion (palace), which quickly becomes the envy of all. Made of the finest building stones and precious stones, this magnificent edifice has no peer. Aladdin's spectacular palace serves as the locale for his honeymoon with the princess.

Aladdin has fully realized his dreams until both the fabulous palace and the princess herself are spirited away to Africa by the evil magician, who steals the lamp and uses it to his advantage. The anguish that Aladdin then feels is reminiscent of Gilliss's description of the poor Chilean miner Godoi, who loses all. Instead of winding up poor like Godoi, however, Aladdin once again finds the

lamp, and employs the genie to recover both the palace and his princess wife.

The story of "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" is complex, taking Shahrazad fully seventy-six of the one thousand and one nights to tell. Summarizing the story, though, we can see that it offers at least seven crucial elements applicable to the mining frontier:

extensive travel to exotic places;

the journey into the underground;

the illumination of that darkness (the miner's lamp);

the discovery of something of interest underground;

the authentication of that which is found underground (assaying);

the temporary loss of that wealth, followed by its quick recovery;

ultimately, the increase in social standing—from rags to riches, as it were.

Through the shrewd application of that wealth originally found underground, Aladdin becomes the prototype of the nabob, who rises from poverty to become rich and famous. Significantly, "nabob" is of Hindu origin, and refers to a man who returns from the East with great wealth. It was a word perfectly suited for individuals who became fantastically wealthy on the mining frontier.

If the prospect of unearthing fabulous deposits of gold or finding precious gemstones growing on trees proved irresistible, and brought to mind Aladdin's adventures, nature was usually reluctant to comply. Although the former did happen in gold-rich California, the Far Western mining frontier offered few of the latter, for gems are rare in the region despite its bounty of metals. Why not, then, once again call upon a genie to help such gems materialize? This is exactly what two enterprising con men attempted to do in the early 1870s, as they perpetrated what became known as the Great Diamond Hoax in Wyoming.

In reporting why it was so easy to swindle people in that infamous hoax, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, based in San Francisco, noted in 1872 that:

> The project . . . swept away all prudence. There is something so fascinating in the idea of picking up diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. It is realizing the stories of Aladdin, and the oriental tales where genies take wonderful fancies to disconsolate and poverty-struck vagabond princes, and show them a bushel or two of diamonds some morning before breakfast.[11]

The writer, of course, was well-acquainted with "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp." It is worth looking more closely at how the swindle occurred to see that the story of Aladdin itself, and fantasies about gems of the Orient, may have played a role in it.

This signature western mining scam began in 1871, when bedraggled prospectors Philip Arnold and John Slack deposited a sack of "rough diamonds" for safekeeping in one of San Francisco's most prestigious and solvent financial institutions—the Bank of California. Word quickly got out to one of the city's most influential capitalists, William C. Ralston, who soon became party to one of the West's most embarrassing frauds.

At first Arnold and Slack were evasive and vague, but after considerable prodding by the bank, they consented to sell half of their interest in what appeared to be the most incredible diamond field in the world. Still, Arnold and Slack were circumspect. They only revealed that they found the stones out in the trackless desert and, of course, only they could identify the exact location.[12] This fabulous mining claim, in fact, was not simply a diamond field, but rather a gem field that also contained rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. As if by magic, the world's most precious gems littered the landscape at an undisclosed lo-

cation somewhere in the American West.

Such treasure called for Orientalist language to place it in perspective. In his romanticized 1937 account of the event, George D. Lyman noted that when the prospectors poured the contents of their sack onto a table, "out gushed a cascade of many colored stones" so bright that they "looked as if they would burn holes through the sheet." According to Lyman, the stones were so valuable that they appeared to be "the ransom of a rajah!"—that is, a wealthy prince or chief from India or Malaysia. Further characterizing the gemstones in Oriental terms, Lyman noted that "the loot of a dozen Burmah temples lay before Ralston's startled gaze."[13]

To perpetuate the sense of mystery, the prospectors demanded that anyone who visited the site had to be blindfolded coming and going to keep them in the dark about how to return to the location. Blindfolding, by the way, figures in "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," another story involving lost treasure that is commonly associated with, but was not originally a part of, the *Arabian Nights*. This blindfolding technique only added to the mystery and intrigue. Although the gem field was apparently located somewhere in the vicinity of the transcontinental railroad route—for that was how the investors got most of the way to the site—the wilds of western Wyoming was about as close as any of those investors could place its whereabouts.

By early 1872, several seemingly knowledgeable people, including mining engineer Henry Janin, had visited the site. Janin pronounced it to be genuine and, moreover, Tiffany and Company of New York authenticated the stones. It seemed beyond wildest belief that a gem field equaling that of the Orient, in particular Burma, could be found in the bleak Wyoming desert, but that appeared to be the case.

The gem fever continued until the site was scrutinized by the nation's premier geologist, Clarence King of the United States Geological Survey. From the outset, something seemed amiss to King because diamonds and other precious stones occur together rarely, if ever. Diamonds and corundum (rubies and sapphires) have different sources, and the likelihood of finding them there—much less together—defied both the odds and King's considerable knowledge of the West's geology and petrology.

At just this time, the world was awed by South Africa's fabulous diamond fields, which had been discovered in 1867 and would soon revolutionize the gemstone industry. Using increasingly sophisticated microscopic analyses, geologists determined that gem stones from different locations had different visual signatures as a result of the particular geological conditions that had led to their creation. The colored gems of Southeast Asia had been famous for hundreds of years, and they too underwent scrutiny by microscope-wielding geologists.

If finding diamonds and colored stones in one location seemed too good to be true, there was a good reason. King and others not only found that the Wyoming location had been "salted" with diamonds from Africa and colored stones from other locales including Southeast Asia, but a closer look at the stones revealed that in their haste to salt the claim, the prospectors had used some that bore facets—the telltale sign of previous gem cutting efforts! It was thus confirmed that this was no natural treasure trove but the handiwork, or rather the criminal mischief, of perpetrators bent on swindling investors.

Given the Orient's association with precious gems, it is not surprising that one of the meanings of the word "Oriental" is "precious, of highest quality or grade; as oriental garnet, opal, or pearl." Then, too, the word Oriental also refers to gems that are different enough mineralogically to be found in unusual colors. For example, "purple, light blue-green, deep-green, and yellow sapphire are respectively called Oriental amethyst, Oriental aquamarine, Oriental emerald, [and] Oriental topaz."

This is an especially interesting definition of

"Oriental," because these oriental stones mimic others, yet possess intrinsic value for exactly that reason. Such "oriental" gemstones are extremely rare, and usually fetch the highest prices. Thus, the Orient not only consistently supplies gems of the traditional kind—red rubies, blue sapphires, white and blue topaz—but also gems that can pose as other precious stones, and be valued more highly than the original stones. In this meaning, Oriental refers to something that seems to have transformative, almost magical, power.[14]

Associating the Orient with mineral riches seems natural enough for several reasons. First, some of the world's great mineral deposits are found there. This fascination, though, goes beyond that fact to a geographical delusion—the belief that the heat of tropical areas helped generate colorful stones, as well as precious metals like gold. In this wishful thinking, the warm temperatures of the tropics presumably helped incubate these colorful mineral "seeds." Philosopher Pico de Mirandola (1463-94) believed that the sun was stronger in the Orient, and that this factor explained the profusion of gems there.

When we recall that a gemstone almost invariably requires faceting to become a jewel, however, then workmanship also enters into the picture. Many believed that the East possessed the finest jewelry makers. The French philosopher, astronomer, and linguist Guillaume Postel (1510-81) claimed that the Orient, particularly Persia, was superior in terms of its art and manufactured goods.[15] That, of course, included jewelry.

A pocketful, or better yet a bushelful, of sparkling gemstones lies at the heart of one of Orientalism's most enduring tropes. Central to this is the gemstone itself, for no other substance on earth has a higher value relative to its size or weight. A gemstone is usually an inorganic mineral—though pearls and organic materials such as amber can qualify—possessing special qualities, including color (e.g., ruby), hardness (ruby, diamond), optical effects (fire opal), and brilliance (diamond), that distinguish it from other minerals. Rarity, of course, is also a major factor in differentiating gems from other materials. The difference between a precious gem like a ruby or diamond, and a semi-precious gem such as garnet or turquoise, is somewhat subjective; the distinction depends on physical characteristics, such as rarity, hardness, etc., and also cultural preferences.[16]

In addition to their natural appearance, most gems are enhanced through faceting, polishing, and other processes used to bring out their special characteristics. The earliest gems were probably used as found by peoples in Paleolithic times. This includes crystals of various kinds whose perfection and symmetry must have awed denizens of an otherwise roughly shaped natural world. However, it is worth noting that widespread gemstone enhancement by humans began about ten thousand years ago, at about the time that they started to domesticate animals and develop crops.

In other words, although the fascination with gems is natural to humankind, their treatment and modification by faceting and polishing occurred hand-in-hand with the rise of "civilization" and its attendant accumulation of wealth and leisure time. The Old World, particularly in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, witnessed the most impressive developments in mining, metallurgy, and gemstone fashioning; hence, the Orient got a jump on the Western world, meaning Europe and the Americas, in this matter. It is worth recalling that Aladdin's gemstones not only grew on trees, but were also apparently faceted—another example of magic transforming nature in the Orient.

But nature did play a major role, for the Orient does, in fact, possess some of the world's most spectacular known gem fields, especially of rubies and sapphires, while Europe and North America are more poorly endowed. This, coupled with the fact that gems are easily transported due to their small size and high value, meant that distant places earned reputations as sources of instant wealth. One example is Burma, currently called Myanmar, a renowned source of rubies. Similarly,

sapphires are associated with Burma and Thailand. Then, too, Marco Polo's fabled lost mines in Asia probably added to the region's mystique and intrigue. In recent times, finds of superb emeralds and aquamarines have been made in Afghanistan and portions of Pakistan, reinforcing the Orient's claim as a region of unequaled gem sources.[17]

Yet a third factor in the appeal of gems involves the mysterious powers attributed by both ancient and modern peoples to stones of various kinds. For this reason, gems can possess value beyond their visual beauty. Given the tendency of human beings to believe in magic, it is not surprising that some stones were and are believed capable of protecting individuals or their property against harm, or of restoring or preserving youth. Some gems were even ground into powder and consumed as medicine—a risky remedy that might contribute to, rather than circumvent, death.

The important point here is that the power attributed to the gem stone is, in part, related to its source. In other words, the "magic" of rubies and sapphires is possessed by both the stones themselves and by the places in which they originated. By extension, the persons, such as shamans, who originally possessed those stones have a connection to the mystery. Such privileged people were found in the Old World, but in the 1820s and early 1830s Mormon prophet Joseph Smith's seerstones provided an American example of how a stone could supposedly offer insights into the otherwise unknowable. The enduring power of such stones can be seen in the crystals, used by ancients or American Indians, now coveted by members of the New Age movement in hopes of gaining what those people supposedly possessed—usually serenity, wisdom, and the like.

Lest we think that the association of mineral treasures with Middle Eastern fantasy tales is confined to the past, it should be noted that it continues in modern popular culture. Consider the fanciful film "Romancing the Stone," from 1984, and its sequel of 1985, "Jewel of the Nile." A more recent internet advertisement for "Jewel Quest Mysteries—Curse of the Emerald Tear" urges prospective online gamers to "unearth jewels and hidden objects while decoding ancient Egyptian mysteries." As part of the game's Full Version Advantages, the options boxes depict four gems—a diamond, ruby, sapphire, and amethyst.[18]

In the nineteenth-century American West, the seductive power of mineral wealth appealed to both the aesthetic imagination and pecuniary interests. In retrospect, capitalism was the genie that played a major role in creating instant mining communities—many bearing romantic names like Golconda, Ruby, Aurora, and Ophir—only to have them turn into picturesque ruins when mines went bust. Mining's particularly volatile boom-and-bust cycles helped create one of the ingredients involved in Orientalizing a landscape, namely ruins.

Given the Victorian imagination, the abandoned mining towns of the West easily evoked far-off places. When Robert Louis Stevenson traveled through northern California in the late 1870s, he observed that "one thing in this new country very particularly strikes a stranger, and that is the number of antiquities." Noting that "already there have been many cycles of population succeeding each other, and passing away and leaving behind relics," Stevenson found these abandoned mining towns to be evocative of the Orient. As he put it: "These, standing on into changed times, strike the imagination as forcibly as any pyramid or feudal tower."

Stevenson concluded that "when the lode comes to an end, and the miners move elsewhere, the town remains behind them, like Palmyra in the desert." Although Stevenson was in a partially forested oak-savannah landscape, the desert analogy worked perfectly. It helped transform these forlorn, abandoned ruins in California into their ancient Middle Eastern counterparts. Like ruins in the Old World, these patently recent ruins were easy to romanticize. All it took was the power of imagination to transform them into antiquities.

Out on the western frontier, the imagination

of an American writer like Mary Hallock Foote (1847–1938) could also run wild, and when it did it was likely to reference the Orient and its peoples. In describing the rough-hewn beginnings of a Colorado mining camp in a novel, Foote observed that "foremost in the strange procession were seen those wandering Ishmaelite families whose sun-darkened faces peer from the curtains of their tents on wheels, along every road which projects the frontier farther into the wilderness."[19]

Foote wrote that passage in 1882, when both the popular press and novels bristled with such descriptions of the tattered but tenacious inhabitants who flocked toward the instant wealth generated by mining and railroading in the American West. There was something mysterious about these wandering peoples, and writers' imaginations often transformed them into Bedouins, Arabs, and other nomadic peoples of the Middle East and southwestern Asia.

Another of Foote's stories, "The Harshaw Bride," reveals how the magical and mineral-rich Orient could insinuate itself into a remote portion of Idaho. In describing a part of Decker's Ranch, Foote artistically noted that the place was "set all about with a hedge of rose, willow and wild-currant bushes, sword grass and tall reeds—the grasses enormous, like Japanese decorations,—crossing the darks of the opposite shore and the lights of the river and sky."

Here, in the basalt plains bordering the Snake River, a girl named Kitty was able to avoid the dangers of rattlesnakes and find "lovely things" reminiscent of Near Eastern gems and baubles. Having acquired the "prospecting fever," Kitty "filled her pockets with specimens of obsidian, jaspers, and chalcedonies, of colors most beautiful, with a deep-dyed opaqueness, a shell fracture, and a satiny polish like jade."[20] In reality, these are at best only semi-precious stones, but in the youthful imagination they became treasures. Through such naïve transference of meaning, a westering nation came to see, and to behold, a deeper Orientalized beauty on its own western frontier.

The *Arabian Nights* stories were but one element in the Orientalization of the mining frontier. In southern Nevada, a lecturer and poet named Herman Knickerbocker made public presentations on the Persian poet and astronomer Omar Khayyam in 1905. Shortly thereafter, the mining community of Rubaiyat, a mysterious name derived from Khayyam's fabled poetry, was founded in southern Nevada as part of its early twentieth century mining boom.[21] At that time, a well-read or "cultured" person had been exposed to Oriental literature like Khayyam's poetry and the *Arabian Nights*. The public, from the Nevada desert to New York City, loved such exotic sentiments.

In Nevada, of course, a town named Rubaiyat seemed perfectly located—an exotic-sounding place of wealth in the desert. Khayyam's original work titled Rubaiyat dates from about 1100 A.D., but it became popular in the Western world only after 1859, when British writer Edward FitzGerald translated and adapted 101 verses from it. The fact that many Americans could recite lines from Rubaiyat revealed not only their fascination with the Orient, but also the speed with which culture diffused to even the most isolated spots in the American West. Moreover, the fact that Khayyam's Rubaiyat emphasized the pleasurable over the hereafter suggests it was part of a more "modern," and more sensual, aspect of Orientalism.[22]

Ultimately, the trope of Aladdin's magic lamp was readily applied to any mineral wealth in any locale. Of the developing mines in the Gogebic Iron Range of northern Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a newspaper writer ecstatically observed in 1886 that "I have never before seen anything that compared with the upsurging of the Gogebic Iron Range." Searching for superlatives, the writer added that "it makes all the tales of Aladin's [*sic*] lamp and genii seem tame and commonplace."[23]

This mention of Aladdin in reference to remote northern Wisconsin and upper Michigan is

significant. It suggests that the isolated locations of mining ventures seemed to encourage Orientalist comparisons, whether they were situated in the Far West, South America, or somewhat closer to the center of North America in the upper Midwest. And yet, the fact that so many mineral discoveries were made so rapidly in the American West, and the fact that its landscape conveyed a sense of the exotic, with its rugged topography and arid or semi-arid climate, made it the perfect place to Orientalize as the kind of locale that Aladdin himself might have encountered on his fabled journeys.

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Notes:

1. Felix Paul Wierzbicki, *California as it is, and As it May Be, or a Guide to the Gold Region* (San Francisco: Printed by W. Bartlett, 1849), 24-5.
2. G. A. Fleming, *California: Its Past History, its Present Position, its Future Prospects* (?:?, 1850), 82.
3. James Melville Gilliss, *The U.S. Naval Astronomical Expedition to the Southern Hemisphere, During the Years 1849-'50-' 51-'52* (Washington, DC: A. O. P. Nicholson, 1855), 244, 257.
4. See: D. Graham Burnett, *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
5. See: Richard Francaviglia, *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).
6. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
7. Sir Richard Francis Burton. *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Now Intituled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (Benares, India: the Kamashastra Society, 1885-6.) Burton had also visited the American West in 1859-60.
8. Sidney Smith, *The Settler's New Home, or, Whether to go, and Whither?* (London: J. Kendrick, 1850), 129.
9. John Charles Frémont, *The Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Oregon & California* (Buffalo, NY: Geo. H. Derby, 1852), preface.
10. Richard Burton, *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009 edition), 14.
11. *New York Times*, "The Way the Company Managed the Affair—The Public as Badly Sold, After All—All the Real Diamonds not from London, From Our own Correspondent, San Francisco, Friday, Nov. 29, 1872." http://talc.geo.umn.edu/courses/1081/notes/page6.html(p. 7; viewed 7 July 2003).
12. As mining historian Jeremy Mouat astutely noted, it is likely that the two perpetrators of the hoax did not act alone. In a paper titled "One of the Best-Known Mining Men in California and the West," presented at the Mining History Association's meeting in Silver City, NM, on 11 June 2010, Mouat suggested that the notorious mine promoter George D. Roberts likely played a role in this most famous of hoaxes.
13. George D. Lyman, *Ralston's Ring: California Plunders the Comstock Lode* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), Ch. 14, "A Sack of Diamonds, May 1872."
14. Oriental, as defined by *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed., Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1938).
15. Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 69-70.
16. Walter Schumann, *Gemstones of the World* (New York: Sterling Publishers, Inc., revised and expanded edition, n.d.).
17. The Americas did have one treasure chest awaiting discovery: the fabulous emerald mines of Columbia, South America, the product of which was shipped back to Spain in well-guarded flotillas.
18. As advertised on the Chill Website, http://chill.comcast.net/deluxe.aspx?code=115601467&refld=hpcovj on 4 Nov. 2008.
19. Mary Hallock Foote, *The Led-Horse Claim: A Romance of a Mining Camp* (1883; reprint: Ridgewood, NJ: The Gregg Press, Inc. 1968), 10-1.
20. Mary Hallock Foote, *A Touch of Sun and Other Stories* (Boston:Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1903), 225-6.
21. Phillip Earl, "The Poet Prospector," paper presented at the Boomtown History Conference, Amargosa, NV, 4 Feb. 2006.
22. See: Holly Edwards (ed.), *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press in Association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2000).
23. *Cleveland Sun*, 23 May 1886, 1.