

wall between you and those snakes' heads, with their glaring eyes and ravening jaws, before the entertainment begins.

It takes some time beginning. You sit there for an hour or more in front of these *grosses jûtes*, white elephants to anything but an Arab. While the musicians drone their chant and bump their drums, you are supposed to be taking in their points. You see various messages passing up to them from voluptuaries seated by themselves. At length the foreigners show signs of moving, in despair of there being anything like a performance. If the proprietor estimates that the movement is genuine, he tells the first dancer to begin. She advances to the footlights with a grin of triumph. She has no doubt that she is perfectly lovely and love-compelling, though she looks like a balloon with legs, as she towers above the footlights.

Doubtless the hip-dancing, which means the swaying of a mountainously fat body, might suggest all manner of passionate declarations if you were able to give it a fair examination; but the rolling about of this uncontrolled mass of obesity is too ungraceful. The whole figure of the woman is so revolting to European ideas of feminine charm, that you soon transfer your attention from the dancer to the audience. Even the interest of the audience is disgusting.

It seems like a recollection of a nightmare to recall even the slightest and the least ill-looking of the dancers, as she stood on the stage above us in her ridiculous little muslin dressing-jacket and enormous tight-fitting breeches of white satin, revealing a monstrous area of bosom and arms covered with sham jewellery, and with what coarse beauty there was in her face inflamed with splashes of red and black and white pigments – the voice of sex crying in the wilderness.

Douglas Sladen, *Carthage and Tunis*, 1906, vol. II, pp. 480–4

In 1798, on a voyage to Syria, C.-F. Volney wrote about Arab dancing. Claiming that a detailed description would be too much for the delicate ears of the readers, he went on to feed them titbits about the 'lewd representations' which comprised the dance. In fact, most of the authors included in this chapter represented dance in the same way – and the charge of lewdness should more appropriately be levelled at them. Niebuhr's account also reveals much about his general attitude to women.