ROMANTIC ORIENTALISM

A Study on the Representation of the Orient in Selected Poetry of
Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the notion of Romantic Orientalism; in particular, the representation of the Orient in the poetry of the Romantics. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe experienced what Edward Said refers to as an ‘Oriental renaissance’; a sudden increase in the popularity of anything concerning the East; particularly literature. This dissertation focuses on the representation of the East in the literature of two of the British Romantic poets; George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron) and Percy Bysshe Shelley and shows how these two poets portray the Orient as an individual and alternative culture.

The first chapter consists of an introduction to the notion of Orientalism within the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a discussion of the social and political context within which Orientalism rose to popularity in Europe during this time; particularly in Britain. This chapter also lists the claims which Edward Said; one of the most popular Orientalists of the twentieth century, makes regarding the portrayal of the East by Western writers. Among these claims, Said states that Western writers are prejudiced against the East and Islam, and think of these as an inferior other.

The second chapter focuses on Lord Byron’s literary representation of the East, through an analysis of some of his most popular Oriental poems; *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, and *The Corsair*. This chapter analyses the extent to which Byron’s travels in the East while on the Grand Tour had an effect on his poetry, and also shows how various elements of the East, including; religion, tradition, superstition, clothing, sexuality, imagery and politics, are portrayed by Byron in his poetry in considerable detail.
This chapter also shows how Byron defends the East in his poetry; particularly Greece, and the Islamic faith. Therefore, this chapter shows how Edward Said’s claims are not relevant to Byron’s poetry.

In the third chapter, the focus shifts to Percy B. Shelley’s literary representation of the East. This chapter highlights Shelley’s love for Greek mythology (despite never having travelled to Greece) as it comes out in his poem, *The Witch of Atlas*. This chapter also shows how Shelley’s Orientalism is different from that of his contemporaries, through an analysis of *Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*, *The Revolt of Islam*, and *Hellas*. Shelley’s philhellenism, as well as his ideals of peace, and anti-imperialist values, are discussed and explored in light of the aforementioned poems. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how Shelley’s Orientalism is an inexplicit, unspoken Orientalism, and therefore different from that of his contemporaries.

The final and concluding chapter shows how both Byron and Shelley’s poetry goes against Edward Said’s claims. This chapter shows that in these poets’ work there are no false claims about the East, no uninformed prejudices and no Islamophobia. The final chapter also reassesses the points discussed throughout the previous chapters, and concludes that both Byron and Shelley’s Orientalism suggests that the poets’ main aim is to show that the British Empire is just as oppressive as the Ottoman Empire, and that, for them, Greece obtaining its independence is better than Britain obtaining more land to colonise. The concluding chapter brings out the main idea of this dissertation; that in Byron and Shelley’s representation of the East, the Orient comes out as an individual and alternative culture, and not as a political enemy.
For my father,

and for my mother
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Chapter 1

Romantic Orientalism: An Introduction

Quite aside from the scientific discoveries of things Oriental made by learned professionals during this period in Europe, there was the virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period.

- Edward Said, 1978

Perhaps one of the most prominent themes in eighteenth and early nineteenth century English literature is the notion of ‘Romantic Orientalism’. The word ‘Romantic’ refers to the British Romantic poets, who wrote between 1785 and 1830. The definition of ‘Orientalism’, however, is not so straightforward, as different poets and scholars approach and present the notion in various ways. In the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘Orientalism’ is defined as ‘the representation of the Orient (especially the Middle East) in Western academic writing, art, or literature’. During the late eighteenth century, a number of European writers, particularly British and French, wrote several literary works featuring the Eastern region of the world which, at the time, was commonly known as the ‘Orient’. The term ‘Orient’ generally captures the group of countries lying in the Middle East and the Far East; those east of the Mediterranean. However, for the British, in particular, exotic lands were not only those in Asia and the Middle East, but any country east of the English channel, including Greece, which we today consider a central European country. In fact, as I shall be discussing in the following chapters, Greece features in several oriental tales.

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The Orient was still a mystery to many during this period, but was generally known to be exotic, splendid, and sumptuously rich. Therefore, in general, Orientalism draws particular attention to the geography, philosophy, culture and local colour of countries which lie in the East. In this dissertation I shall be discussing the romantic representation of the Orient through the pen of George Gordon Byron, known as Lord Byron (1788-1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). I shall also be commenting on the criticism of Edward Said, an Orientalist whose views on the Western representation of the Orient are somewhat controversial.

During the eighteenth century, people living in the West began to familiarise themselves with the Orient, through the travel writing of those who had visited it, commercial exchanges, and wars which took place in the area. Naturally, people were curious about this ‘new-found’ exotic land, and soon the Orient gained popularity. Edgar Quinet and Edward Said say that between the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, the world experienced an ‘Oriental renaissance’.\(^2\) This era saw the discovery of texts written in Sanskrit, Zend and Arabic by Anquetil Duperron and Sir William Jones; a discovery which contributed to the West’s curiosity about the Orient. In 1706, *One Thousand and One Nights* (more commonly known as *The Arabian Nights*) was anonymously translated into English. This was perhaps one of the most influential pieces of literature which led Orientalism to spread like wildfire in Europe. *The Arabian Nights* was particularly influential to Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a young man. The eighteenth century in England is synonymous with the genre of the epic; a favourite of the educated elite. This genre was not very accessible to the common public, so the idea of new tales about lavish, far away lands seemed all the more enticing to the British working class, making Orientalism immediately popular.

\(^2\) Said, p. 42.
Following the translation of *The Arabian Nights*, there was a great fluctuation of ‘Oriental’ literature in Europe, particularly in England and in France. William Collins’s *Persian Eclogues* (1742), Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759), and William Beckford’s *Vathek, An Arabian Tale* (1787) soon became some of the best-selling Oriental tales of the eighteenth century. These works greatly influenced a number of British poets, including Walter Savage Landor, Robert Southey, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Thomas Moore, taking orientalism into the early nineteenth century; the age of the Romantics. The nineteenth century saw the publication of the Oriental tales of the aforementioned, as well as translations of Persian literature by poets such as Ferdowsi, Hafez and Saadi into English, which were also influential to the Romantics. Between 1812 and 1818, an impressive number of oriental poems had been written, and most of them enjoyed great success and popularity in England. These included Byron’s *The Giaour* (1813) and Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* (1817), among others.

Undeniably, Orientalism and Oriental tales are strongly linked to politics and the notion of imperialism. Politically, the eighteenth century was a very turbulent period. During this era, wars were being fought across all corners of the world, from the Americas to India to Africa. In Europe, eighteenth century politics were characterised by the French Revolution (1789-1799), Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and Syria (1798), and the Treaties of Tilsit (1807). By the mid-eighteen hundreds, around eighty-five percent of the earth’s surface was dominated by what became the two most powerful European nations of the time; Britain and France. Following these events, a wave of political conflicts was initiated throughout Europe. This eventually evolved into a complex political scenario of imperialism, despotism, and war. During this time, The Ottoman empire; perhaps the third most powerful empire at the time, was particularly interested in taking over Greece. The former soon became Europe’s common enemy, and many hoped that it would perhaps eventually dissolve. Greece found itself in the
centre of a game between the British, the Turks and the Russians, who all wanted the country for themselves. Eventually, the British, the French and the Russians all came together, after pressure from many European philhellenes such as Byron and Shelley and years of negotiation, to ensure Greece’s independence. Together they managed to destroy the Turkish and Egyptian fleets which were making advances on Greece in 1827, helping Greece to finally obtain its long-fought-for independence in 1832.

The notions of imperialism and despotism became particularly salient topics, and a number of Romantic poets took to addressing these notions in their works through Orientalism. The new interest in Eastern countries due to the political situation of the time, as well as the travel writing and translations of Eastern literary works which I have discussed earlier, sparked great interest in the East among the British public. Soon, Romantic Orientalism became one of the most sought-after literary genres in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It became a means of showing the middle and lower classes what lies ahead of the English channel, as well as informing them of the ever-so-active political climate of their time.

In this dissertation I will be showing how both Byron and Shelley address the political situation of Greece, in particular. In the preface to *Hellas*, which I shall be discussing in detail in Chapter 3, Shelley manages to capture the relationship between Greece, the British, the Turks and Russia perfectly. He writes:

The English permit their own oppressors to act according to their natural sympathy with the Turkish tyrant, and to brand upon their name the indelible blot of an alliance with the enemies of domestic happiness, of Christianity and civilisation.

Russia desires to possess, not to liberate Greece; and is contented to see the Turks, its natural enemies, and the Greeks, its intended slaves, enfeeble each other until one or both fall into its net. The wise and generous policy of England would have consisted in establishing the independence of Greece, and in maintaining it both against Russia and the Turk; – but when
was the oppressor generous or just?

The question which Shelley asks becomes important to our understanding of Romantic Orientalism. Romantic Orientalism seeks to find out who the real oppressor is; the foreign tyrant, or the British colonialist. In the following chapters I will be showing how both Byron and Shelley are against oppression and imperialism, and how they both show that the real oppressor might not lie in the Orient, but in their own homeland.

During the twentieth century, many scholars studied and wrote about Orientalism. Perhaps the most prominent Orientalist is Edward Said (1935-2003). Said argues in favour of the Orient, and against its representation by European writers. He says that the Europeans were knowledgable about the fact that they held a huge part of the world within their power, and this, according to Said, contributed to feelings of superiority on part of the West over the East.³ Arthur James Balfour, Lord Cromer, and Edward Said, all agree that man has always created a distinction between the East and the West. According to Said, the ‘oriental individual’ is seen as living in a world of his own, with his own national and cultural ‘boundaries’. Said believes that these boundaries are not set by the Orient itself, but by the West’s knowledge of the Orient, which ‘creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world’.⁴ He continues that the West was always at an advantage, because its people knew that their culture was the stronger one.⁵ For Said, the relationship between the East and the West is a division between ‘entities that coexist in a state of tension produced by what is believed to be radical difference’.⁶

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³ Said, p. 41.
⁴ Said, p. 40.
⁵ Said, p. 44.
⁶ Said, p. 44.
Said believes that the relationship between those who called themselves Orientalists and the Orient itself was textual, and that upon encountering the Orient in person, one could see that there were differences to what was described in text. Said says that the Orient described in text was made up of ‘popular prejudices’. He also compares the Orient as depicted by the West to a play on a stage, in which the characters which emanate from it all come from a ‘fabulously rich world’. This, says Said, has influenced the way in which great writers such as Marlowe and Shakespeare have portrayed the Orient, since the imagery, ideas and figures which are found in their works all have to do with the riches of the Orient. Moreover, Said argues that the language used to describe the Orient, by authors such as Dante, makes it look alien to the European audience. I suggest that this view is an over-generalisation. In the following chapter I will show how Lord Byron’s correspondence with his publisher, John Murray, suggests that he wanted his poetry to be as accurate as possible and based only on true facts. I will also show how Byron’s own travels to the East, as well as his extensive reading about the Orient, provided him with all the information he needed to produce an accurate representation of the Orient.

Said also problematises the relationship between Christianity and Islam. He writes that both geographically, and culturally, Islam is close to Christianity (in that both Mohammed and Christ are viewed in a similar way by their respective followers), which causes uneasiness in the West. According to Said, the West has perceived Islam as a threat since the beginning of time. He says that to the West, the East is some kind of reincarnation of all that

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7 Said, pp. 52-53.
8 Said, p. 63.
9 Said, pp. 71-72.
10 Said, p. 73.
is European, and he believes that the West views Mohammed as an impostor who tries to imitate Christ. In this dissertation I shall also be discussing the representation of Islam in the poetry of Byron and Shelley. Mohammed Sharafuddin writes that the relationship between Islam and English literature is a relationship between two cultures, and also between two different political and religious systems. This relationship, as Sharafuddin puts it, is ‘conditioned by historical and geographical factors’. The latter sustains that Said is prejudiced against the West, and that his description of how the West represents the Orient ‘distorts everything’. Contrary to Said, Sharafuddin believes that not all Oriental works were the product of the European cultural mentality or of any form of prejudice. He writes that to Said, Orientalism was a result of despotism in the West and of prejudice against the East. Contrastingly, he argues that the Romantics were actually against despotism, and this might have led to a genuine interest in the Oriental culture. Sharafuddin views despotism as a ‘signpost’ in Romantic Orientalism, rather than as a theme.

For the Romantics, the Orient was, on one hand, a symbol of tyranny which they wanted to overcome, but on the other hand, an alternative to the corrupt political situation in Europe at the time. In the following chapters I shall be arguing in favour of Sharafuddin’s beliefs, and against Said’s claims. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to show how Byron and Shelley describe and portray the Orient as an individual and alternative culture, rather than as a political enemy.

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13 Sharafuddin, p. xvi.

14 Sharafuddin, p. xxi.
Chapter 2

Byron and the Mystique of the Middle East

With those countries, and events connected with them, all my really poetical feelings begin and end.

- Lord Byron, 1816

Stick to the East;—the oracle, Staël, told me it was the only poetical policy. The North, South, and West, have all been exhausted; but from the East, we have nothing but S * *’s unsaleables,—and these he has contrived to spoil, by adopting only their most outrageous fictions. His personages don’t interest us, and yours will. You will have no competitor; and, if you had, you ought to be glad of it. The little I have done in that way is merely a ‘voice in the wilderness’ and, if it has had any success, that also will prove that the public are orientalizing, and pave the path for you.

These were the words which Lord Byron wrote to his close friend, Tom Moore, after Madam de Staël had told him that writing about the East would surely grant him great success. This turned out to be true, as thousands of copies of Lord Byron’s Oriental tales were sold on their first day of release. Byron’s Oriental works went down better with the British public than those of the poet laureate at the time, Robert Southey, and this was something which Byron was very proud of. Nigel Leask writes that Byron’s Eastern Tales produced between 1813 and 1816 had made him ‘the most popular poet in Britain’. But what is it, exactly, that makes these tales so special?


In 1809, Byron went on the Grand Tour of the Mediterranean. During this tour he visited Albania, Greece, and Turkey, which at the time were considered to be the borders of the Orient. This journey is recorded in one of his best-selling poems of all time; *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, a poem in four cantos which made him famous overnight, and paved the way for the rest of his Oriental tales. Byron’s very detailed notes to the same poem suggest that this journey left a great impact on him and on the literature which he wrote after his travels. Lady Annabella Milbanke, Byron’s wife, writes that he loved the Orient, and often expressed desires of returning to the East. She also writes that Byron preferred the Turkish ‘opinions, manners and dress’ over those of the British, and had also admitted to her that he was very close to becoming a Mussulman. The experience which he gained while on his travels, together with his extensive reading about the Orient, makes Lord Byron a great connoisseur of the Orient. In this chapter, I shall be highlighting instances in which Byron’s literary representation of the East shows that he truly knew the East inside-out.

Mohammed Sharafuddin discusses the extent to which Byron’s experiences while on the Grand Tour have contributed to his Oriental tales. He says that Byron’s visits to Albania, Greece and Turkey were certainly not those of a ‘naive traveller’. He believes that Byron was already very well informed on Greek civilisation prior to his travels. Lord Byron had read a lot about the Orient, and had, in fact, gotten some of his information from other writers. The description of the funeral ritual in *The Bride of Abydos*, for example, was written with the help of Jonathan Scott’s introduction to *The Arabian Nights*. According to Sharafuddin,

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20 Sharafuddin, p. 239.
Byron’s lines are a ‘faithful representation of ritual practice’.\(^{21}\) However, there is a lot which shows that his poems were greatly influenced by the events and the people which he had personally come across while on the Grand Tour. In \textit{The Giaour}, for instance, Byron mentions ‘the voice of stern Taheer’, clearly referring to Tahiri; Byron’s Albanian servant who was allegedly able to predict the future:

\begin{quote}
Warn’d by the voice of stern Taheer,
Deep in whose darkly boding ear
The death shot peal’d of murder near
\end{quote}

[lines 1076-78]

In \textit{The Giaour}, Leila is found guilty of her infidelity, and is killed by being drowned in a closed sack. Byron was inspired to write this story by true events. At the time, being put in a closed sack and left in the sea to drown was a common punishment for those who committed adultery. While on his travels in Athens, Byron met a woman who was given this punishment. He felt sorry for this woman, and had negotiated for her to be freed from her punishment, under the condition of fleeing the country. In a letter to Byron, Lord Sligo, one of his friends from Cambridge, recalls how he heard about this incident a few days later while in Athens himself.\(^{22}\) Consequently, in a letter to Professor Edward Daniel Clarke, Byron tells him about Sligo’s letter, and admits that this event had ‘certainly first suggested to [him] the story of \textit{The Giaour}’.\(^{23}\) \textit{The Bride of Abydos} was also inspired by true events. In a letter to John Galt

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\(^{21}\) Sharafuddin, p. 238.


about the tale, Byron writes that he ‘had a living character in [his] eye for Zuleika’.  

Furthermore, Sharafuddin suggests that it is also possible that the characters of Seyd, in The Corsair, and Giaffir, in The Bride of Abydos, might have been inspired by Byron’s meeting with Ali Pasha. The actual meeting is described in the second canto of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage [lines 55-66].

Byron’s Turkish Tales are very vivid and his descriptions are extremely accurate. The culture of the East comes to life in Byron’s verses. The depiction of eastern ‘costume’, what we nowadays refer to as ‘local colour’, was very important to Byron. Nigel Leask defines Byron’s ‘costume’ as ‘topographical and cultural description’. While on the Grand Tour, Byron had gained experience which the other writers of his time did not have, and he felt that he should live up to this status by describing all Eastern manner and dress accurately. However, even though he had learnt a lot during these travels, Byron often wrote to his publisher, John Murray, to confirm that whatever he had written in his poetry was correct. In fact, many scholars have noted that Byron had an obsessive concern with the accuracy of fact and detail. I shall now be moving on to show some examples of Lord Byron’s representation of the East in his Oriental tales; religious practices, traditions and celebrations, superstition, clothing, sexuality, imagery, and last but not least, politics.

Religion is perhaps one of the greatest pillars of Eastern culture, and undoubtedly, Byron would have been exposed to a number of Muslim beliefs, rites and rituals while on his travels in the East. Among the descriptions of Islamic ‘costume’, Byron includes ideas, words and traditions which are related to various Eastern religious and spiritual beliefs. In The Giaour,

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25 Sharafuddin, p. 223.

26 Leask, p. 20.
for instance, Byron makes reference to ‘Al-Sirat’s arch’, which, according to Muslim belief, is the bridge through which Muslims enter heaven. Muslims also believe that upon entering heaven, faithful males will have a beautiful young virgin as their companion, known as a ‘houri’. Byron makes reference to both in *The Giaour*:

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Though on Al-Sirat’s arch I stood,
Which totters o’er the fiery flood,
With paradise within my view,
And all his Houris beckoning through.
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[lines 483-86]

Byron was also well informed about Muslim religious terminology, such as the word ‘Muftis’ [lines 491-92]; the name by which Muslim legal experts, or clerics, with particular power in religious matters are referred to.

As in most cultures, there are a number of traditions, feasts and celebrations associated with the East; some of which Byron also includes in his work. In *The Giaour*, Byron mentions the Eastern celebrations of Rhamazan and the Bairam feast:

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Tonight - set Rhamazani’s sun -
Tonight - the Bairam feast’s begun
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[lines 228-29]

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Strange rumours in our city say
Upon that eve she fled away;
When Rhamazan’s last sun was set,
And flashing from each minaret
Millions of lamps proclaim’d the feast
Of Bairam through the boundless East.
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[lines 447-51]
The word ‘Bairam’ comes from its Turkish equivalent; ‘bayrâm’. It refers to either of two Muslim festivals, the Lesser Bairam; which takes place at the end of Ramadan, and the Greater Bairam; which takes place at the end of the Islamic year, just seventy days after the former. These feasts are celebrated nationally by both religious and non-religious entities. In *The Giaour*, Byron refers to the Lesser Bairam, a feast of three days.

One of the typical feasts which took place in the Pasha’s court in honour of warriors is also described briefly in the second canto of *The Corsair*. Byron describes the banquet, the servants, the smoking and the dancing women in the feast:

> High in his hall reclines the turban’d Seyd;  
> Around - the bearded chiefs he came to lead.  
> Removed the banquet, and the last pilaff -  
> Forbidden draughts, ’tis said, he dared to quaff,  
> Though to the rest the sober berry’s juice  
> The slaves bear round for rigid Moslem’s use;  
> The long chibouque’s dissolving cloud supply,  
> While dance the Almas to wind minstrelsy.

[II, lines 29-36]

Another Islamic tradition is that of the carving of a turban on the gravestones of males. In *The Bride of Abydos*, a bird mourns above the ‘turban-stone’ of Selim [line 1100]. In *The Giaour*, Byron also refers to the custom of welcoming strangers into a home by blessing bread and salt [lines 341-43]. Byron is also familiar with the Koran; the Islamic book of faith. He is aware that according to the Koran, alcoholic beverages are forbidden to Muslims. In *The Corsair*, Byron remarks that Conrad, although not a Muslim, does not consume alcohol [lines 429-32].
Superstition is another important element in Islamic culture. Nigel Leask comments on superstition in *The Giaour*, saying that both the giaour and Hassan ‘embody the superstitions of their respective cultures’, as both come from different cultural and religious backgrounds.\(^\text{27}\) One of the underlying themes in *The Giaour* is that of vampires. The vampire superstition was a common belief in the Levant at the time. According to this superstition, those who commit crimes like that of the giaour would be punished by becoming vampires after their death. They would then kill their loved ones by drinking their blood. The narrator in *The Giaour* says that the giaour will be condemned to this fate after killing Hassan [lines 754-60]. The narrator also curses the ‘false infidel’ and wishes him to be in the same place as Eblis, who had been expelled from God’s heaven in the Koran. In Islam, and Orientalism, Eblis has the same connotation as Satan in Christianity. Furthermore, in *The Giaour* Byron also makes reference to the evil eye, which was believed to be a curse by someone who is envious or covetous [lines 610-14].

Another important aspect of Eastern culture is attire. Byron was fond of Albanian costume in particular. In a letter to his mother while in Turkey in 1809, Byron describes the Albanian costume in great detail, and remarks that it is ‘the most magnificent in the world’.\(^\text{28}\) The famous portrait of Byron in Albanian dress by Thomas Phillips further suggests that Byron was quite proud of his Albanian costume. In his Oriental tales, Byron truly makes an effort to be as authentic as possible, by not only describing characters, but also their dress. Moreover, he refers to pieces of clothing using their original terms, usually Turkish. By referring to pieces of clothing and weaponry by their Turkish names, rather than their English

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\(^{27}\) Leask, p. 29.

translation, Byron engages his reader in a vivid Oriental world. The turban, for instance; made out of a long length of cotton or silk, is a headdress which is worn especially by Muslim men, particularly Turks. In his Oriental tales, Byron refers to the turban a number of times. In *The Giaour*, all Turkish weaponry and items of clothing mentioned are assigned their accurate Turkish names; including the ‘falchion’ (line 661), a short curved broad sword; the ‘palampore’ (line 666), an embroidered shawl; the ‘calpac’ (line 717), the central part of the turban; and the ‘symar’ (line 1273), a length of cloth in which a person is wrapped for burial. For the sake of the length of this chapter, these are only a few among several other examples.

In his Oriental tales, Byron also explores the notion of the odalisque and the Islamic Harem, particularly in *The Giaour*, where Leila is a female slave kept in Hassan's harem. The harem is popular in Islamic tradition, and a landmark to Islamic sexuality. Leslie Peirce says that ‘the harem is undoubtedly the most prevalent symbol in Western myths constructed around the theme of Muslim sensuality’.29 Byron’s female figure takes different shapes across his different works. Byron portrays the female as a slave in a Harem, as a beautiful young virgin, a lover, and also as an allegory of a land. However, the general idea is always that the female is an ‘object’ greatly admired by males; a prized possession. In any case, according to Sharafuddin, Byron acknowledged the fact that Muslim women were different from British women, and he found the former ‘almost irresistible’.30

In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the female is a slave, useful only for the male’s entertainment. Byron writes that in Ali Pasha’s palace ‘woman's voice is never heard’ [Canto

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30 Sharafuddin, p. 248.
II, line 541]. It seems that like his fellow British countrymen, Byron was not in favour of women being ‘tamed to [their] cage’ [line 544]. \(^{31}\) Similarly, in *The Giaour*, although resurrected through the giaour’s story, Leila is never given a voice. Perhaps through these two poems, Byron wanted to highlight the lack of women’s rights in the Muslim culture of the East. Leila is robbed from her identity as a female, and represented as an allegory for Greece, which in Byron’s time had been fought for by two great empires; the Ottoman and the European. Here we are reminded that Byron is a Romantic poet, after all; as the image of a country symbolised by a beautiful woman is a common motif in Romantic poetry.

Contrastingly, in *The Bride of Abydos*, the image is one of luxurious, rich sensuality; what Sharafuddin refers to as ‘the combination of purity and sexuality, religious yearning and sensual desire’. \(^{32}\) Byron’s image of Zuleika is one of a very refined young lady in the bloom of her sexuality. Zuleika is introduced as a ‘Houris’; a beautiful young woman, and a ‘Peri’; a beautiful feminine spirit [lines 147 and 151]. Byron’s description of Zuleika’s room is also very luxurious and sensual; her ‘silken Ottoman’, her ‘fairy fingers’ rubbing the ‘fragrant beads of amber’, the amulet, the ‘lamp of fretted gold’, flowers and perfume:

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All that can eye or sense delight
Are gathered in that gorgeous room
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[lines 564-65]

According to Marilyn Butler, Byron’s alleged homosexuality is what makes his descriptions of female sexuality and male aggressiveness truly ‘remarkable’. \(^{33}\)

\(^{31}\) Sharafuddin, p. 244.

\(^{32}\) Sharafuddin, p. 246.

In his Oriental tales, Byron also includes imagery which is commonly found in Persian poetry. One of these images is that of the nightingale singing to the rose, found in *The Giaour* [lines 21-27] and in *The Bride of Abydos* [lines 8-10]. The image of the nightingale and the rose, also referred to as the ‘bulbul’ and ‘gul’, is a leitmotif in Persian literature. The rose is a symbol of beauty and perfection, while the nightingale is representative of the lover, and is often portrayed singing to the rose. This image became popular in European poetry after Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had written an adaptation of a love poem by Ibrahim Pasha in 1717. According to Mohammed Sharafuddin and Jerome McGann, Byron associates this image with that of the Mediterranean landscape. Sharafuddin writes that as an Englishman, Byron saw the Mediterranean landscape as the ‘real’; the closest to paradise. He goes on to describe Byron’s landscape imagery as ‘never static, but always flowing, always in movement’. According to Sharafuddin, this imagery is what constitutes Byron’s ‘oriental realism’. By ‘oriental realism’ Sharafuddin means a mixture of literature and experience, which is truly what Byron’s Oriental tales are made of. The image of the nightingale singing to the rose may be interpreted as an allegory of a lover singing to his beloved. This is what links the land of Greece to Leila in *The Giaour*, according to McGann. Just as Leila ends up dead because of the two men who are fighting for her, Greece is destroyed because of two powers attempting to gain its control. This is not the only interpretation of this image. Nigel Leask comments on this image as it appears in *The Bride of Abydos*, saying that the image of

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34 Leask, p. 42.

35 Sharafuddin, p. 231.

36 Sharafuddin, pp. 233-234.

the rose and the nightingale represents two aspects of the poem; Selim’s metamorphosis from Turkish prince to pirate, and the two lovers’ metamorphosis; from siblings to lovers.\(^{38}\)

What I have discussed in this chapter up to this point is Byron’s factual literary representation of the Orient. My aim is to show that Byron's literary representation of the East is one of someone who is very well acquainted with it; one in which detail is not imagined but real. However, Byron’s Oriental tales are not only related to the Eastern culture, but also to the political situation of his time; both in Britain and in the East. Therefore, I shall now be moving on to discuss how Byron’s Orientalism binds with the notion of imperialism.

According to Sharafuddin, the ‘truth of the Orient’ was ignored by English ethics. Byron was offended by this British way of thinking that London was at the centre of the world.\(^{39}\) Perhaps this is why he often showed his preference for Eastern life. As I have explained in the previous chapter, at the time, Britain did not want the Ottoman empire to fall, in fear of the Russians taking its place, and consequently ‘robbing’ them of their chance to make Greece a colony. However, if the fall of the Ottoman empire meant more land for the British empire, then the British were content. Leask argues that Byron’s views on this matter are somewhat contradicting. He says this because on one hand, Byron agrees with his fellow Englishmen that the British empire should win over the Ottoman empire, while on the other hand, Byron thinks that imperialism had been of negative influence to the English and European culture, as it had resulted in loss of contact with the classical, Hellenistic source. Leask says that this is a situation of pathos.\(^{40}\)

\(^{38}\) Leask, p. 41.

\(^{39}\) Sharafuddin, p. 220.

\(^{40}\) Leask, pp. 23-24.
National identity and independence are very important to Byron, and he sympathises with the countries affected by imperialism. In *The Giaour*, Byron focuses on the relationship between Greece and Turkey. Unlike his contemporaries, Southey and Moore, Byron does not use the political situation of Greece to discuss that of Britain, or as ‘an occasion for moral meditation’; as Sharafuddin puts it.\textsuperscript{41} Byron treats the political situation of Greece independently from that of Britain; he never makes any connection between the two, as if he were Greek himself. Byron is interested in Greece’s politics out of preoccupation, rather than because of any political intent.

In *The Giaour*, Greece is symbolised by Leila. Leila is from Circassia; which in Byron’s time was a country found on the border between the West and the East, most probably referring to Greece. Hassan is a Turk, hence representing the Ottoman empire; while the giaour is a Venetian exile, therefore representing the European empires. The first few lines of the poem are voiced by the narrator, who tells the tale in typical fashion of Romantic Orientalism. These lines pay homage to Greece’s former glory, while the rest of the poem invites the reader to see the similarity between the remains of this great country and the corpse of Leila, who had been slain in a conflict between a Turk and a Christian:

\begin{verbatim}
Fair clime! where every season smiles
Benignant o’er those blessed isles,
Which seen from far Colonna’s height,
Make glad the heart that hails the sight,
And lend to loneliness delight.
\end{verbatim}

[lines 7-11]

\textsuperscript{41} Sharafuddin, p. 254.
Throughout the poem, Byron praises Greece, and mourns for its fall against the Ottoman Empire. However, he never blames the Turks or the Christians for this fall.

*The Bride of Abydos* is also a poem which shows Byron’s concern with politics. Unlike *The Giaour*, the setting of *The Bride of Abydos* is entirely Oriental, and there are no Christian elements whatsoever. While in *The Giaour* Byron makes no connection to Britain, in *The Bride of Abydos* there are subtle remarks on his country’s political climate, which one is only able to notice if s/he has some knowledge of British politics in Byron’s time. According to Nigel Leask, while *The Giaour* addresses imperialism, *The Bride of Abydos* addresses the Whigs, particularly their leader at the time; Lord Holland, who was also one of Byron’s friends. The Whigs were advocates of Greek independence, as this would benefit England. Leask believes that in this poem, Byron advocates the Whigs’ notion of liberty, and views against corruption and imperialism. Leask says that Selim’s remarks on how his pirates are social outcasts who long for freedom, is, in fact, Byron’s address to the Whigs:

The last of Lambro’s patriots there  
Anticipated freedom share;  
And oft around the cavern fire  
On visionary schemes debate,  
To snatch the Rayahs from their fate.  
So let them ease their hearts with prate  
Of equal rights, which man ne’er knew;  
I have a love for freedom too.

[lines 862-69]

In the letter to John Galt which I have referred to earlier, Byron writes that he had originally meant for Selim and Zuleika to be siblings, but later changed their status to cousins. Leask believes that the aim of this relationship between Selim and Zuleika was to lessen the harsh

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42 Leask, pp. 38-39.
political connotations of the poem. He says that by making them cousins, Byron ‘considerably dampened the poem’s political philhellenic message’, because the reason for Selim’s metamorphosis changes from political into amorous.43 Had Byron not given so much importance to the love story of Selim and Zuleika, the poem would have had a great potential to advocate Whig ideology.

After having analysed Lord Byron’s Oriental tales, one might ask, why write in such great detail about a culture which is not one’s own? According to Sharafuddin, the main reason behind Byron’s writing of the Turkish Tales was his wish to express his distaste of English complacency and supremacy.44 By writing about the Orient, Byron writes about a reality which is different from what his British readers were used to; a reality with different cultural and religious values. This ‘otherness’ was what Byron loved so much about the East. If this is so, then there is a stark contrast between Byron’s Orientalism, and Edward Said’s Orientalism. The latter’s claims that Western writers portrayed the East as the inferior culture are put to shame, as Byron tends to defend the East, rather than mock it.

In *The Giaour*, for instance, it is the Christian who is referred to as the infidel, not the Muslim. Furthermore, the multiplicity of voices which make up the fragments of *The Giaour* leaves room for both Christianity and Islam to coexist in Byron’s tale. This is proof that Byron’s Orient is not the product of an Islamophobic mind. The dual between the giaour and Hassan is more than just a fight over the love of a woman. Arguably, this fight symbolises the greater fight; that between West and East. Both the giaour and Hassan are given an equal voice, and this suggests that for Byron, both Christian and Muslim are responsible for the death of Leila; the fall of Greece. Therefore, not only does Byron not mock the East, but he

43 Leask, p. 43.

44 Sharafuddin, p. 243.
does not pass any judgement on the West either. Although Byron indeed did display a particular liking towards the East in his private life, and although he praises the beauty of the Mediterranean landscape countless times in his poetry, his writing is in no way politically biased. Sharafuddin comments on this, saying that by distancing himself from both West and East, and refusing to show an opinion of his own, Byron is a sort of ‘homeless figure’. This, according to Sharafuddin, is not only evident in Byron himself, but also in the Byronic hero, who often comes across as an ‘outsider’.45

Towards the end of *The Giaour*, the giaour confesses to the monk that had he been Hassan, he too would have destroyed Leila for her infidelity:

    Yet did he but what I had done
    Had she been false to more than one

[lines 1062-63]

According to Nigel Leask, by admitting this, the giaour destroys any possible claims that the Europeans are superior.46 Leask also believes that the fragmentary form of the poem is representative of the cultural degradation of Islam and Christianity, which, according to the author, is the main theme of the poem.47 Both men, despite their religious beliefs, eventually resort to violence. Hassan kills Leila, and the giaour murders Hassan. This violence is the result of imperialism, rather than each character’s culture. Hence, Byron’s lines show that although the East and the West are divided by both geographical and religious differences, the Eastern mode of thought may not be so far off from that of the West. Even though the giaour and Hassan are seen to be totally different from each other, and the giaour is seen as an

45 Sharafuddin, p. 264.
46 Leask, p. 29.
47 Leask, p. 30.
outsider by the Turks throughout the poem; both men have been through the same experience. Both have loved and lost. In essence, both men are ultimately the same. Leask refers to this as ‘a symmetry between the two men’. This further contrasts with Edward Said’s views that the Europeans are superior to the people of the East.

Within the brevity of this chapter I have pointed out a number of occasions (certainly, there are many more) in which, in my opinion, the detail with which Byron presents the Orient is superb. Lord Byron’s Eastern tales are proof that he knew the East inside out. The accuracy of his descriptions of Eastern religion, tradition, superstition and dress, as well as his discussion of Greek politics, is enough to suggest that Byron did not simply write about the East because Madame De Staël had advised him to (although this surely played a role). I believe that Byron did not write his Eastern Tales solely for monetary purposes, but rather, out of his profound love for the culture and the geography of the East, which had left such a good impression on him during his travels. According to Sharafuddin, ‘Islam made it possible for Byron to give a hard, authentic edge to one of the central impulses of Romanticism’. Sharafuddin continues that by moving from ‘Ossian and the Highlanders to Ali and the Albanians’, Byron’s literature moved from ‘illusions to realities’. Through his Oriental tales, Byron manages to link the notions of Romanticism; love, beauty, nature and patriotism, to countries which although not his own, he truly considered as his second home.

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48 Leask, p. 29.
49 Sharafuddin, p. 228.
50 Sharafuddin, p. 228.
Chapter 3

Shelley: Unspoken Orientalism

*Power, like a desolating pestilence,*
*Pollutes whate'er it touches; and obedience,*
*Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,*
*Makes slaves of men, and, of the human frame*
*A mechanised automaton.*

- Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1813

Throughout this chapter, I shall be focusing on the ‘Orientalism’ of Percy Bysshe Shelley. I would like to show how Shelley’s Orientalism is different from the Orientalism of his contemporaries; Byron, Southey, Moore and Beckford. While Lord Byron, for instance, relies on the significance of places which he had actually visited himself to portray the Orient, Shelley’s vision of the Orient is mostly constructed in his mind, with the help of other Oriental literature and travel writing. In fact, in the preface to *Hellas*, Shelley himself says that ‘common fame is the only authority which [he] can allege for the details which form the basis of the poem’. Andrew Warren believes that Orientalism by definition for Shelley meant writing about other cultures through exhaustive Oriental scholarship and equating it with sources of the imagination. Therefore, Shelley’s Orientalism is, as Jalal Uddin Khan puts it, unrealistic. Khan believes that ‘Shelley’s romantic Orientalism avoids being realistic and defies categorisation in terms of the elements of typical or general cultural traditions’.

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Shelley's Orientalism is not explicit, and may often be read between the lines. Although there is a small number of occasions in which Shelley draws ideas from other Oriental literature, the majority of his ‘Oriental’ poetry, if we may call it that, does not include conventional descriptions of local colour, like Byron’s Oriental tales do, or detailed footnotes explaining its Oriental elements, like Beckford’s. Shelley's aim is not to give a detailed account of the lands, the history or the culture of the Orient. Rather, Shelley reworks the notion of Orientalism, and uses it to write poetry which is political, before Oriental. In this chapter I shall be briefly outlining some ‘conventional’ Oriental elements which feature in Shelley’s poetry. However, a greater part of this chapter will be dedicated to discussing how Shelley omits detailed descriptions, and uses the Orient as a tool to write about the matters which concern him the most; the relationship between the self and the outer world and imperialism.

Although I have discussed Byron's Orientalism in the previous chapter, and I have now asserted that Shelley's Orientalism takes a different path, it is not my purpose to compare Shelley to Byron, or vice versa. Neither is it to read Shelley’s work in Byron’s shadow. However, as many critics have already pointed out, it is quite tempting to do so. Many have pointed out that Shelley had always felt a sense of inferiority when he compared himself to his good friend Byron, and this inferiority is often reflected in critics’ opinions of Shelley’s works. In fact, in a letter to Byron, Shelley himself admits that he feels ‘the burden of [his] own insignificance and impotence’ when he thinks about him.\(^{54}\) Despite this, we must keep in mind that both poets have their own style, and that the judgement we pass on their work depends on our point of view. A reading of Shelley within context opens up possibilities for

understanding his work as personal and emotional, and occasionally also as literature of political undertones. On the other hand, a reading of Shelley in Byron’s shadow creates a distinction between Byron’s ‘Orientalism’ and Shelley’s, often putting the latter at a disadvantage. Throughout this chapter, I shall be adopting the former approach.

Despite never having travelled to the East, Shelley was very interested in its philosophy. When he joined Eton College, at the tender age of twelve, Shelley started to acquaint himself with books about the Orient. His mentor at Eton, James Lind, had a lasting influence on him. In her note on *The Revolt of Islam*, Mary Shelley confirms that the old man who saves Laon from the prison tower in the poem had been modelled by Shelley on Lind. Through Lind, Shelley became acquainted with the work of Sir William Jones, an Anglo-Welsh scholar on Ancient India, who became another of Shelley’s greatest influences. Others who might have possibly influenced Shelley include Sydney Owenson, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Isaac D’Israeli. Shelley was also greatly influenced by Persian Sufi Literature. One of the images taken from Persian literature which features in one of Shelley’s poems is that of the nightingale and the rose (which I have already discussed in relation to Byron in the previous chapter). In *The Indian Girl’s Song*, also known as *The Indian Serenade*, Shelley compares the nightingale’s love to that of the persona:

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The Nightingale's complaint,
It dies upon her heart;—
As I must on thine,
Oh, belovèd as thou art!
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[lines 13-16]

Orientalism also features in Shelley’s mythological poem; *The Witch of Atlas*, in the form of Greek and Egyptian mythology as well as in the description of elements of the Eastern
landscape. This poem brings out Shelley’s playfulness and his love of Greek mythology. The protagonist is a Witch; daughter of the Atlantides. In Greek mythology the Atlantides are referred to as the Pleiades, the seven daughters of the titan Atlas and the sea nymph Pleione. Hermaphrodite; the creation of the Witch in Shelley’s poem, is also the offspring of Hermes (god of merchants and thieves) and Aphrodite (goddess of beauty, sexuality and fertility) in Greek mythology. The Witch lives on the Atlas Mountains; a range of mountains which extend across Northern Africa; from Morocco to Tunisia. In mythology these mountains are home to the brother of Prometheus; a mythical giant who was fated to suspend the heavens as a punishment for his disobedience to the gods. Throughout the poem, we are taken on a journey through landmarks of the Orient in Shelley’s time. Among these locations, Shelley mentions the African region of ‘Garamant’ [line 130], the area of Timbuktoo in Mali (‘Thamondocana’); a region known for Muslim culture [line 424], ‘Hydaspes’; a river in Pakistan [line 451], and Ethiopia (‘Axumè’) [line 500]. Shelley also makes reference to Greek and Egyptian culture. He refers to the ‘Elysian air’, clearly reverberating Elysium; paradise in Greek mythology [line 401], and the ‘Osirian feast’; a feast dedicated to the Egyptian god, Osiris [line 512]. In Egyptian culture and myth, Osiris is the symbol of the revival of the seasons, since, according to myth, he had been killed by his brother and then resurrected by his magician-wife, Isis. The Osirian festival is a feast held in Abydos in Egypt, in honour of Osiris and Isis. Shelley also mentions Greek mythological figures, including ‘Silenus’; the tutor of Dionysius, the Greek god of wine [line 106], ‘Vulcan’; husband of Aphrodite, as well as the mythological blacksmith who crafts manacles to chain Prometheus in Greek mythology [line 289], ‘Pygmalion’; a king of Cyprus in Greek mythology [line 328], ‘Apis’; an Egyptian god [line 627], and ‘Amasis’; an Egyptian king [line 648].
These details show that although Shelley had never travelled to the East, he was very much aware of its landscape and its culture, perhaps due to his extensive reading. It is also evident that Shelley’s knowledge of Greek mythology is extensive. This poem exhibits a very different side of Shelley, when compared to his style in the poems which I shall be discussing next. In *The Witch of Atlas*, Shelley’s oriental style is straightforward and lighthearted. However, across Shelley’s major body of work there are very few instances in which his Orientalism is as explicit. As I have mentioned earlier, Shelley's Orientalism is not so straightforward, and is closely linked to imperialism. Therefore, I shall now be moving on to discuss this sort of Orientalism, as it appears in (arguably) three of his best works; *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude, The Revolt of Islam* and *Hellas*.

Before I go on to discuss the political connotations of Shelley’s Orientalism, I will start by discussing how it may be interpreted as a personal and emotional journey; a journey in which he transports himself to far away lands, perhaps to escape the mundanity of his everyday life in Europe. According to Andrew Warren, for Shelley, Orientalism becomes ‘a kind of turning away from the realities of human life towards an abstraction or ideal’. This sort of Orientalism manifests itself within solitude. Warren strongly believes that Shelley’s Orientalism is a result of solipsism. The relationship between the self and the outer world is one of the main ideas in Shelley’s work. Perhaps, the poem which shows this most clearly is *Alastor*.

*Alastor* was written shortly after Shelley had been diagnosed with consumption, a condition from which he later recovered. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the poem is an expression of Shelley’s emotions when faced with imminent death. In her note to the poem, Shelley’s wife, Mary Shelley, remarks that the work is ‘the outpouring of his own

emotions, embodied in the purest form he could conceive, painted in the ideal hues which his brilliant imagination inspired, and softened by the recent anticipation of death’. During the same time, in 1815, both Shelley's grandfather and his son; Mary's first born of two weeks, had passed away. This all suggests that during hard times, Shelley finds refuge in the imagined journey through Eastern lands.

In *Alastor*, Shelley writes about the poet’s personal journey, rather than about a journey to the East. Shelley mentions countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East which in his time where considered Oriental; Athens, Tyre, Balbec, Jerusalem, Babylon, Memphis, Thebes, and Ethiopia [lines 109-115], however he does not go into detail about any of them or their cultures. These lands, and the journey which the protagonist ‘poet’ takes, were very well known in Shelley’s era, and do not have any particular significance to Shelley himself. Most people of his time were aware of Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt, Chateaubriand’s journeys across the Middle East and Lord Byron’s Grand Tour, to name a few. Moreover, many critics have agreed with Joseph Raban’s view that the poet’s journey in *Alastor* is almost identical to that of Alexander the Great. The lack of detail regarding these countries, and the Orient in general, suggests that Shelley’s intention is not for *Alastor* to be read as an Oriental tale.

One of the most debated questions regarding *Alastor* is why the protagonist is called a ‘poet’ and never given a name. (The title name, ‘Alastor’, does not refer to the protagonist of the poem, but to the spirit which animates the protagonist’s imagination.) Warren believes that Shelley uses the term ‘poet’ because he has two aims; the creation of an ‘Orientalized Ideal’ and ‘the Oriental quest’ to capture that same ideal. He describes this technique as a

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‘translation of the objective world’ into ‘mere poetic figuration’.\(^{57}\) Warren also believes that the ‘poet’ reduces himself to his vision of the East, represented by the ‘veiled maid’.\(^ {58}\) According to Warren, the translation of the objective into the poetic and the imagining of oneself in the East is the definition of Shelley’s Orientalism.

The representation of the East as a ‘veiled maid’ in *Alastor* suggests that the poet is essentially feminising the notion of the Orient, and presenting it as a figure of an idealised woman. The relationship between the poet and the ‘veiled maid’ becomes a Platonic one, as the *Alastor* poet loses his own self in the pursuit of his idealised female figure. The notion of the annihilation of the self is an element of Sufism; a branch of Islamic faith. It is very probable that Shelley was influenced by Sufism and Persian Sufi literature, in which this idea is very present. In Sufism, the male Romantic subject searches for an ideal female other, in hopes that through her he may attain perfection. Once he identifies the ‘other’, he wishes to lose his own self in order to become one with his other; a notion referred to as ‘fanaa’ (Arabic: fanā). Elham Nilchian remarks that, ‘in *Alastor*, the Poet’s infatuation with the ideal veiled maid of his vision indicates a mystic thirst for idealisation of the other’.\(^ {59}\) Although the *Alastor* poet is not a representation of Shelley himself, I would like to suggest that there is a link between the ‘thirst for idealisation’ of the poet and that of Shelley. The poet’s ‘mystic thirst’ for the ideal, which he finds in the figure of the ‘veiled maid’, is a reflection of Shelley’s thirst for peace, a positive revolution, and a Europe free of the negative effects of imperialism. Shelley finds this ideal in the imagined journey in the Orient; a

\(^{57}\) Warren, p. 134.

\(^{58}\) Warren, p. 142.

journey which enables him to flee what Nigel Leask refers to as an ‘obstacle ridden Europe’.  

Leask considers the relationship between self and world to be closely linked to Shelley’s portrayal of imperialism. He compares Shelley, who writes post-revolution, to Rousseau, who writes pre-revolution, and whose works are also greatly concerned with the notion of solitude. According to Leask, in their solitude, the characters of both writers are able to be transparent about imperialism. Similarly, according to Warren, ‘in Shelley’s thought, British colonialism and imperialism are the result of both a misconceived political schema and a misguided notion of the relationship between self and world’.

Perhaps *The Revolt of Islam* (originally published under the title of *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century*) is Shelley’s most popular work on the subject of imperialism. This poem is mainly about the failure of the French Revolution, and its ideals transpose, as it were, on to an Oriental scene. In his preface to the poem, Shelley says that he intends the poem to be read in light of the French Revolution, and he describes the revolution in his tale as the *beau idéal* of the French Revolution. In this poem, written in twelve cantos, the two main characters set the start to a revolution against their despotic ruler. This despotic ruler is modelled on the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire while the city, referred to in the poem as the ‘Golden City’, is modelled on Constantinople. In her note on the poem, Mary Shelley describes the young protagonists as

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61 Leask, p. 89.

62 Warren p. 133.
‘youth nourished in dreams of liberty’. In an 1817 letter to a prospective publisher, probably Longman & Co., Shelley writes:

It is, in fact, a tale illustrative of such a revolution as might be supposed to take place in an European nation, acted upon by the opinions of what has been called (erroneously, as I think) the modern philosophy, and contending with ancient notions and the supposed advantage derived from them to those who support them. It is a Revolution of this kind that is the beau idéal, as it were, of the French Revolution, but produced by the influence of individual genius and out of general knowledge.

The poem’s title is often the subject of controversy. The Revolt of Islam; A Poem, in Twelve Cantos, becomes especially significant since it is not the poem’s original title, but a title assigned to the work after publishers refused to publish the work under its original title, Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century. The latter was rejected due to its incestuous and religious connotations. The most controversial thing, however, is Shelley’s somewhat loose way of using the word ‘Islam’. In the aforementioned letter, Shelley comments on the poem, saying that ‘the scene is supposed to be laid in Constantinople and modern Greece, but without much attempt at minute delineation of Mahometan manners’. So if the poem is not supposed to be linked to ‘Mahometan manners’, why does Shelley put the word ‘Islam’ in the title? Leask says that by using the word ‘Islam’, Shelley might as well be referring to any people East of the Mediterranean, and not just the Islamic community in particular. Therefore, according to

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66 Leask, p. 72.
Leask, Edward Said’s claims that for western cultures the Orient is a ‘composite whole’ are applicable to Shelley’s poem. Another theory is that Shelley chose the latter title in a very quick decision before publishing, without really thinking about its connotations. Harsh censorship in England at the time meant that Shelley could not publish work which was explicitly about the French Revolution, which perhaps explains the change of setting to Constantinople, and consequently, the change of the title to *The Revolt of Islam*. According to Andrew Warren, if this is the case, then censorship had ‘forced’ Shelley into Orientalism. I believe that, to a certain extent, censorship did ‘force’ Shelley into Orientalism, since by writing about the Orient, particularly Greece, Shelley not only suggests that the Orient is the ‘ideal’, but also indirectly suggests his dislike of British imperialism; something which he could not do explicitly due to censorship.

Although the story of the poem is supposed to be set in Constantinople, there are no descriptions of local colour, history, or tradition, save for some unclear links. The mysterious woman’s tale in the first canto of the poem, for instance, is linked to Manichean cosmology; an element of Eastern mythology. The word ‘Golden’ used to describe the Golden City (which replaces the name of the actual city of Constantinople), might remind the reader of parts of Constantinople, such as the Golden Horn (an inlet of the Bosporus strait in Turkey), and the Golden Gate (a Byzantine monument). However, there is no certainty that Shelley meant for these links to be understood in this way, as there are no footnotes or annotations to confirm it. This suggests that Shelley’s poem is mostly based on an imagined Orient. It is also suggested that, in the same way as in *Alastor*, Shelley does not include any details because his aim is to produce a work about imperialism and revolution, rather than an Oriental tale.

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67 Warren, p. 186.
Warren describes the setting of *The Revolt of Islam* as ‘quasi-Oriental’; a setting which is neither European nor strictly Oriental. He says that this kind of setting has two effects; ‘it works to unbind the strict dichotomy between East and West that is buoyed by the Orientalist scholarship of Shelley’s day’ and it also ‘directly engages Regency England’s political imaginary’.\(^68\) However, Warren goes on to say that this kind of setting is problematic because it is often read and interpreted ‘in Byron’s shadow’. This is because only Byron had travelled to the East and was capable of translating the culture which he came across during his travels into poetry, while Shelley had only reached Italy, and was allegedly ‘disinterested in the ‘manners’ of anyone other than the ancient Greeks’.\(^69\) Even though Shelley was so fond of these Greek ‘manners’, he had never actually visited Greece. Shelley probably borrowed the idyllic Greek setting of Argolis which opens Canto II of *The Revolt of Islam* from Edward Daniel Clarke’s *Travels in Various Countries in Europe, Asia and Africa* (1814). Nonetheless, the Greek setting becomes of utmost importance to our understanding of *The Revolt of Islam*.

Despite the obvious Greek setting, Shelley refrains from giving accurate details about the Greek landscape and specific places in the city. In the headnote to his edition of the poem, Jack Donovan writes that ‘on several occasions Greek place-names in the drafts have been cancelled or have not been transcribed into the copy from which the poem was printed’.\(^70\) It is therefore evident that Shelley deliberately omits such details. In Canto V, for example, Shelley describes the city in which Laon arrives to help in the revolution:

> The moon was hanging low

\(^68\) Warren, p. 186.

\(^69\) Warren, p. 186.

Over the Asian mountains, and outspread
The plain, the City, and the Camp below,
Skirted the midnight Ocean’s glistening flow,
The City’s moonlit spires and myriad lamps,
Like stars in a sublunar sky did glow,
And fires blazed far amid the scattered camps,
Like springs of flame, which burst where’er swift Earthquake

[Canto V, lines 1721-8]

Shelley does not name the Asian mountains, the City, or the Ocean. According to Lawrence Masakazu Yoneta, Shelley’s choice of Greece as the setting for The Revolt of Islam is not coincidental. Yoneta asks why the poem lacks descriptions of local colour, and how this is significant to the poem’s heroic idealism. He says that by deliberately cancelling place names in his poem, Shelley eliminates Greece’s historical identity, and generalises the land into a ‘pure sphere of tradition and influence’. Consequently, the qualities of heroic idealism of Laon and Cythna, according to Yoneta, become associated with the past of Greece. The past of classical Greece is synonymous with an organised, democratic political system, free from tyranny and oppression; Shelley’s ideal political setting. Therefore, Greece becomes a moral setting in The Revolt of Islam, rather than a geographical one. This all suggests that by eliminating all forms of local colour, Shelley ensures that his poem is not read as an Oriental tale, but as an example of an ideal revolution.

In The Revolt of Islam, Shelley also discusses the ‘sexual and political tyranny of Islam’, as Nigel Leask puts it. Cythna, or rather Laone, leads a feminist uprising against this sort of treatment. According to Leask, the active role which is adopted by Cythna ‘sets The

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72 Yoneta, p. 220.

73 Leask, p. 111.
Revolt ideologically apart from Southey, Byron and Moore’s poem’s of eastern revolution’.\textsuperscript{74} Cythna has also been interpreted by some critics as having Hellenistic qualities. According to Leask, Cythna/Laone is a ‘Hellenized’ woman who leads a revolution against Oriental tyranny.\textsuperscript{75} Therefore, Shelley’s fondness of Greek values is not only highlighted in the setting of the poem, but also in one of the main characters.

Greece becomes important again in what would be Shelley’s final completed and published work before his death; Hellas. Hellas (the Greek name for ‘Greece’) is a lyrical drama about Greece’s struggle to obtain independence from the Turks. Shelley’s source for this drama is Aeschylus’s The Persians. The preface to this lyrical ballad is particularly significant, as it captures the political situation throughout Europe and in Greece during the time, and sheds light on Shelley’s thoughts on imperialism. Shelley asserts that ‘we are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece’ and that ‘the modern Greek is the descendant of those glorious beings’, referring to the ancient Greeks. Shelley also believes that the Greeks have a ‘social perfection’. The poet then comments on the political situation of the time, in which Russia was waiting for either Greece or Turkey, or both, to fall so that it could take over them. As I have explained in the introductory chapter, during the same time, Britain wanted Greece to gain its independence from the Turks, so that the British could make it part of their empire. In Hellas, Shelley invites the British public of his time to help the Greeks to obtain their independence, rather than siding with their enemies in pursuit of their own gain. In the drama, the Greeks are represented by the chorus; a group of Greek slaves and concubines who speak about their country and their people’s struggle to obtain independence from the Turks. Although Shelley was writing during a time when the

\textsuperscript{74} Leask, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{75} Leask, pp. 133-134.
war in Greece was still at an early stage (1821); a time when Greek independence did not seem likely, he makes the Greeks victorious in his drama. Throughout the drama, Shelley suggests that the Greeks have a strong will, and that this will is what will eventually lead to their independence. By doing this, Shelley helps his British and European readers to sympathise with the Greeks, thus advocating philhellenism.

Through the examples of the three works which I have discussed, I have shown how Shelley idealises the East, moralises the Greek setting, and promotes philhellenism. I would like to conclude this chapter by affirming that, as I have shown (although briefly), Shelley’s greatest body of work is concerned with politics; both British and Greek. Shelley's poetry is an attempt to bring about political change, and to transmit a message of peace. Shelley is an advocate of peace, love and non-violence, and, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, is against absolute power which results in oppression and slavery. This idea is not only present in the ‘Oriental’ works which I have discussed, but also in Shelley’s *Queen Mab*, of which the epigraph is taken, *The Mask of Anarchy* and *A Philosophical View of Reform*. In my view, Shelley’s Orientalism is very different from both that of his contemporaries as well as from Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism. According to Nilchian, ‘what distinguishes Shelley's Orientalism from that of his predecessors [...] and other Orientalists of the age is that it syncretises rather than translates’. Nilchian continues that 'there might be a fusion of cultural traditions in Shelley's work, where he weaves together the tropes that can be located in Sufism with tropes from English language poetry'. Similarly, Khan believes that Shelley’s ‘love of freedom, purity of ideals and transcendent philosophy rise far above the racist, ethnocentric and imperialist construction of an Indian East and thus defy Said’s seemingly straight and clear-cut categorisation’.76 It is evident that Shelley writes about the East in an

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76 Khan, p. 37.
attempt to mentally and emotionally escape the European political situation he is constrained to; a political scenario in which everyone is obsessed with power. Leask says that ‘the Stendhalian ennui and disenchantment of post-Napoleonic Europe is relieved for Shelley by a glimpse of dawn in the East’.

In Shelley's literature, Orientalism is not the end, but a means to an end; a tool that enables him to write freely about politics without being censored. This is why Shelley's Orientalism is an unspoken Orientalism.

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77 Leask, p. 108.
Chapter 4

Conclusion: The Orient as an Individual and Alternative Culture

Throughout this dissertation I have sought to establish why the British Romantic writers of the early nineteenth century chose to write extensively about the Orient. Some argue that publishing Oriental literature in the early nineteenth century was a means to financial gain. As I have discussed earlier, this opinion is encouraged by Lord Byron’s letter to Tom Moore (1813), saying that Madame de Staël had instructed him to write about the East, as this had not yet been exhausted by other writers and could therefore bring him great success. Four years later, in Beppo, Byron admits that his intention was to sell his Oriental poetry:

Oh that I had the art of easy writing
What should be easy reading! could I scale
Parnassus, where the Muses sit inditing
Those pretty poems never known to fail!
How quickly would I print (the world delighting)
A Grecian, Syrian, or Assyrian tale;
And sell you, mix’d with Western sentimentalism,
Some samples of the finest Orientalism.

[Canto LI]

Nigel Leask describes Lord Byron as a businessman, and his relationship with Tom Moore as a business partnership. Leask also refers to De Staël as ‘Europe’s leading consultant in cultural capital’. However, in the second chapter I have argued that there is more that shows that although Orientalism brought Byron significant success and wealth, he did not only write about the East in order to make money, but because of his honest interest in the Orient.

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Following what I have discussed in chapter three, it is most certainly not the case that Shelley had any financial gain in mind when writing about Greece, as his primary aim was to promote peace. Others argue that the Romantics wrote about the Orient because of the awe and wonder instilled in them by the recent discovery of its lavish lands. According to Marilyn Butler, the poets’ interest in the Middle East was not charged by an interest in the picturesque Eastern lands; as textbooks often suggest, but rather, by their interest in notions of Orientalism.\textsuperscript{79} Butler also adds that the East attracted Europeans because of its spiritual values as well as its sensuous courts and harems.\textsuperscript{80} While I do believe that this played an important role in the growth of Orientalism in Europe in the eighteenth century, I also believe that Orientalism was the perfect opportunity for Romantic writers to express their thoughts on the European political scenario, while also romanticising Eastern lands, which ensured that their message reached the British public without being subjected to censorship.

If we had to compare Byron and Shelley, it can be observed that a common theme features in the Oriental poetry of both; Greece’s struggle for independence and its struggle with the Ottoman Empire. Although the two poets have different ways of externalising their thoughts about this situation, both of them have the same opinion. As I have discussed in the first chapter, I agree with Mohammed Sharafuddin, who says that the Romantics are actually against despotism. In the previous chapters I have shown how the poets’ concern about despotism comes out in \textit{The Giaour}, \textit{The Revolt of Islam} and \textit{Hellas}. They would rather have independence and peace for both Britain and Greece, and perhaps also the Ottoman Empire, rather than have their own country be a despot over others.


\textsuperscript{80} Butler, p. 69.
Byron and Shelley’s philhellenism was vital for Greece to obtain its independence. It was due to pressure from these two poets, as well as a few others who agreed with them, that the great European empires felt the urgent need to pitch in and help Greece. Harold Nicolson writes that:

The trumpet call which Byron sounded, irresponsibly perhaps, and with no real conception of the consequences, echoed through England and through France, through Germany and Russia; it was taken up at Jena, at Göttingen, and at Zürich; it became the literary stimulus of the Philhellenic movement in Europe.

Byron not only helped Greece through his writing, but also planned to physically fight with the Greeks in the battle for independence, after returning to Greece a second time in 1824; a journey during which he contracted a fever which eventually cost him his life. Many deem Byron’s decision to do this a poor one, as he had no military experience, but nonetheless, this shows that it is undeniable that his love for Greece did not die before him. Agreeing with what Lady Anabella Milbanke had pointed out, perhaps Byron did indeed prefer the Orient and its ways over those of the British. In a similar way, Shelley idealises the Orient in Alastor, through the image of the veiled maid. By idealising the East, Shelley shows that he prefers to find peace and solace in it, even if only imaginatively, in order to escape the political chaos back home. In The Revolt of Islam, Shelley shows that violence and revolution is not always the solution to political turbulence, while in Hellas, like Byron, he shows that perhaps it is better if Greece had its own independence rather than being subjected to the despotic rule of the British.

As I have explained in the first chapter of this dissertation, according to Edward Said, Western writers wrote about the East with a sense of superiority, since they knew that the

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81 Harold Nicolson, Byron: The Last Journey (Great Britain: Prion Books Limited, 1999), p. 44.
West was more powerful at the time. However, this view contrasts to how the Orient is actually portrayed in the poetry of the British Romantics. Not only do the Romantics not discriminate against Islam or the Orient, but they admire the beauty and exoticness of the East, and show an honest interest in the Oriental culture. I argue against Said’s views, as it is exactly because of the knowledge of how powerful the British Empire really was, that Byron and Shelley worked so hard for Greece’s independence, as they knew that Britain’s power over the East could bring about more negative consequences than positive ones. In no instance in Byron or Shelley’s Oriental tales is there anything suggestive of a sense of superiority. Byron and Shelley were only superior in one way; in that they knew what was best for the East better than Britain’s leaders at the time.

Said also argues that Western writers write according to popular prejudices and false claims made by writers who call themselves Orientalists. In this dissertation I have shown that this is not the case. I have shown how Byron’s Oriental tales are proof that his representation of the East is authentic, as attention is paid to every little detail. While it is true that the East is portrayed as an incredibly rich and elaborate land, as can be observed in Byron’s descriptions of Ali Pasha’s court, feasts, harems, and the intricate and elaborate detail of Turkish army weaponry and Albanian dress, there is much more in his representation of the Orient than imagery. Byron adds these descriptions because they are true of the Orient, and they make up Eastern culture as he lived it while on his travels, not because he wants to portray the Orient as a ‘fabulously rich world’. Shelley, on the other hand, never describes any of the riches of the Orient, and focuses his poetry on the East’s philosophy and mythology; further confirming that the wealth of the Orient in no way interferes with the poets’ representation of it.

In the introductory chapter to this dissertation I have also discussed how Said believes that Islam and Mohammed are seen through a negative eye by Western writers. However, throughout this dissertation I have shown how there are absolutely no instances in which either Byron or Shelley present Islam in this way. Although Shelley uses the term ‘Islam’ in the title of *The Revolt of Islam* quite loosely, and could certainly have avoided the controversy around this, the poem itself contains no signs of prejudice against the religion or its followers. The equality with which Shelley presents the characters of different religious beliefs in *Hellas*, as well as that with which Byron presents the Christian and the Mussulman in *The Giaour*, is proof that for both poets, Christianity and Islam can coexist, as they are ultimately both in search of the same thing; peace and political freedom.

While Orientalism in general might perhaps be as Said describes it, and while there might be writers who represent the Orient in a false manner, Romantic Orientalism, particularly that of Byron and Shelley, is not. I would therefore like to conclude that for Byron and Shelley, the Orient captures two things; a symbol of the tyranny of the Ottoman empire, and its despotism over Greece and its neighbouring countries, yet also a reminder of their own country’s tyranny and despotism over other countries which form part of its colony. In light of this revelation, the poets’ hope for a better future shifts over to the Orient, which although clouded by the Turkish aggression for power, holds a peaceful alternative to the corrupt European political situation of their time. The ultimate difference in the representation of Byron and Shelley’s Orient lies in the terminology they use, and in the explicitness with which the two poets present their thoughts. As I have shown in the previous chapters, while Byron presents the Orient through very detailed descriptions, Shelley keeps his representation of the Orient deliberately vague. However, both use Orientalism as a tool to write about the Orient as an individual and alternative culture.
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