



Byron's Oriental Tales

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*The dead have been awakened – shall I sleep?
The World's at war with tyrants – shall I crouch?
The harvest's ripe – and shall I pause to reap?
I slumber not; the thorn is in my Couch;
Each day a trumpet soundeth in mine ear,
Its echo in my heart...*

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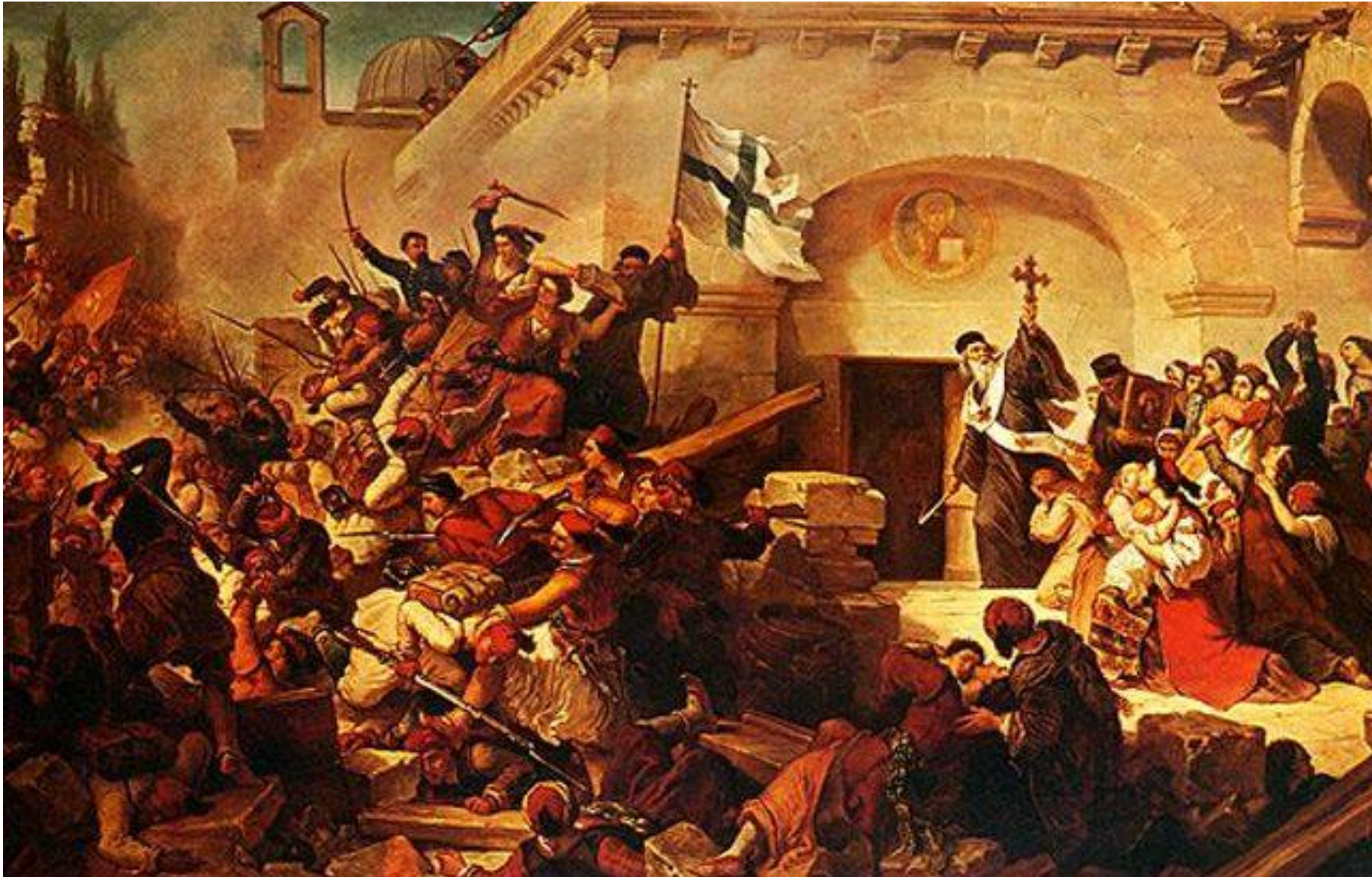
In the “romantic” period, “Orientalism” was a large concept, by no means to be defined with strict regard to the dictionary; and it is no more precise today. Here we interpret “Oriental” in the narrow sense of “Eastern”; and in particular, “Islamic Eastern”. There were other areas of Orientalism – Armenian, for example – in which Byron was also interested, but the Islamic East informs the largest portion of the poetry he wrote deriving from the subject.





In medieval European epics and romances, written with the Crusades as background, and then in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the Turkish threat to Christian Europe hovering near, Islam was the enemy. In poetry, the dialogue between Islam and Christianity was, to put it mildly, simplistic.

The changing dynamic of British imperial culture in the late Romantic period is succinctly expressed in Lord Byron's *Oriental Tales*. While Byron was a connoisseur of cultures, his audience, in large part, was comprised of the citizens of European metropolitan centers where his work was available in print. Byron challenged this audience's preconceptions with his writing, referring often to foreign cultures in what he called "some samples of the finest Orientalism".



The painting represents the Greek struggle for independence





The idea of Orientalism as it was conceived by Lord Byron in the early 1800's refers to a kind of fascination with and depiction of the customs, practices, and mores of Eastern cultures.

Orientalism is the idea of a "romanticized" and "exotic" land that existed outside of the political struggles of Europe, replete with its own heritage and set of values. While Byron's Orientalism by no means lionized or privileged these values. Reflecting upon the differences between the Occident and the Orient provided the poet with inspiration much like what his predecessors found in vast, uncontrollable nature.

A Portrait of Lord Byron in "Oriental" outfit

This well known image of the poet is often contrasted with a similar portrait in which he is depicted musing in typical English garb.





Byron's Orientalism is often praised, and used as a contrast with that of other "romantic" writers, because it was based on experience. At first he probably used the books – particularly travel books written by people more experienced than himself – to get his own ideas about the Orient in context. But as he got more sophisticated he used them more as factual sources, to give his later verse, in ottava rima, the convincing detail which he could now see that his early poems lacked.

Byron travelled in Albania, Turkey and the Levant from September 1809 to April 1811.

Ottava rima - an Italian stanza form composed of eight 11-syllable lines, rhyming *abababcc*. It originated in the late 13th and early 14th centuries and was developed by Tuscan poets for religious verse and drama and in troubadour songs.



The reception of Lord Byron at Missolonghi by Theodoros Vryzakis

Oriental Tales

Following the first and second cantos of the *Child-Harold Pilgrimage*, Byron creates six poems called "Oriental Tales". The appeal to the East was characteristic of the romanticists: it revealed a different type of beauty from the ancient Greco-Roman ideal that the Classicists were guided by; the East is also a place where passions rage, where despots stifle freedom by resorting to Eastern cunning and cruelty, and the romantic hero placed in this world reveals his freedom-loving face to face with tyranny.



Byron's most significant "Oriental Tales" include "**The Bride of Abydos**," and "**The Corsair**." Certain **Cantos of Don Juan** also specifically include the protagonist's embroilment in the politics of a Turkish harem. Most important to these "Oriental" tales, though, is that Byron's encounter with radical alterity was grounded in a desire to experience and faithfully represent the other, rather than judge its validity or worth.





The most appreciated of Byron's "samples" is his poem **The Giaour** /'dʒaʊə/

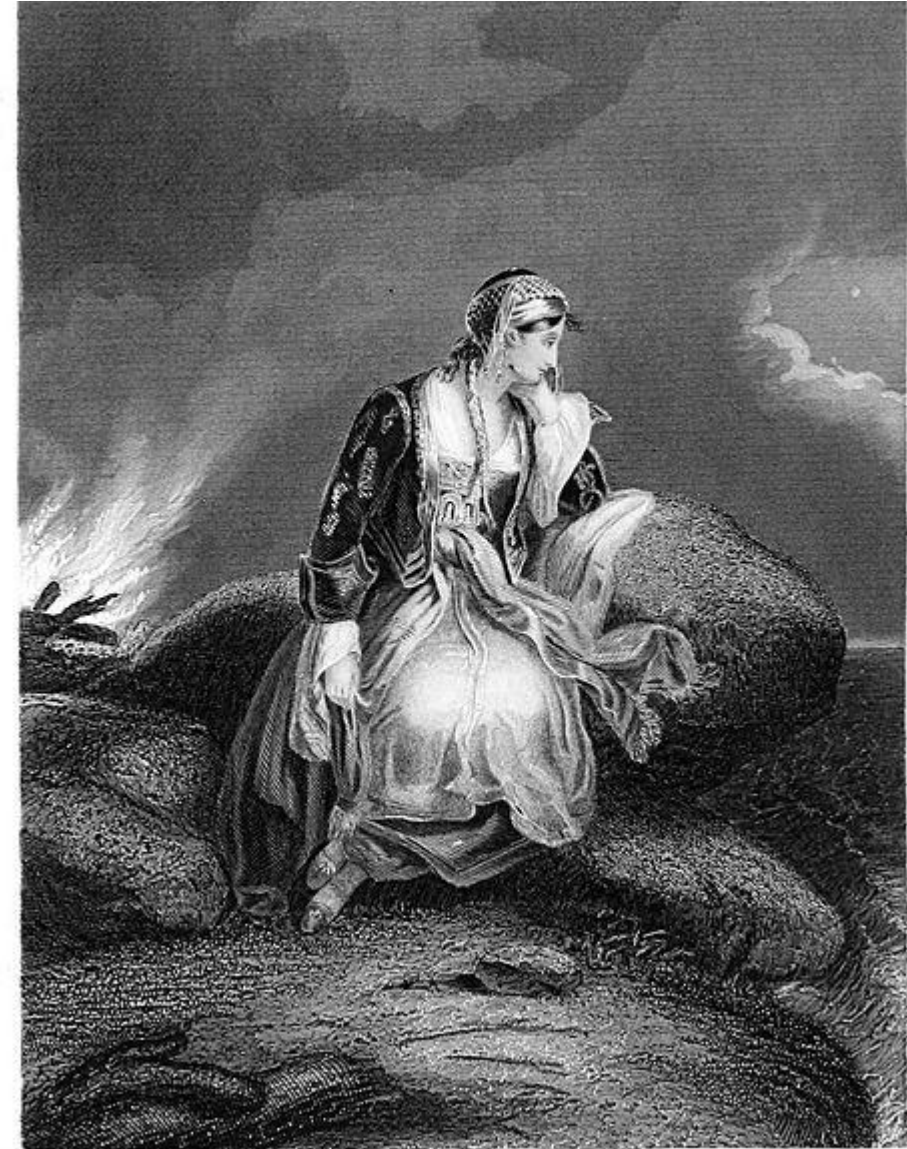
Composed of fragments written from different perspectives, the poem tells of the Giaour (a Christian called by the local pejorative for "infidel" or "foreigner") fights against Hassan, an example of traditional Islamic culture. The subject of contention between the two is the affection of a young woman, who is unfortunately drowned by Hassan upon his discovery of her infidelity with the Giaour.

Despite its obviously patriarchal and Eurocentric slant, "The Giaour" is notable in that it exposes British audiences to the values of a wildly different culture, and presents those values in a way in which the Giaour himself is a sort of interloper into an established system.

Eugène Delacroix -
Combat of the Giaour and
the Pasha



THE CORSAIR



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[4]

THE CORSAIR

The image of a "Byron hero" takes on new features. The heroes of these poems are the people of action, active protest. Their past and future are surrounded by mystery, but some events forced them to break away from their native land. Giaour, an Italian; the hero of "The bride of Abydos" Selim is brought up by his uncle - the insidious plowman who killed his father - seeking freedom, becomes the leader of pirates. The poem "The Corsair" (Byron defines its genre as "the tale") tells of the mysterious leader of corsairs Conrad. The fragmentary composition, characteristic of Byron's poems, allows only individual episodes of the hero's life to be recognized. Byron sees Conrad as both a hero and a villain. He admires Conrad's strength of character, but objectively sees the impossibility of winning a solitary battle with the whole world. With even greater force, the poet emphasises the lighter sense of Byron's hero - love. Without it, such a hero can not be imagined: that is why the death of Medora in The Corsair ends the whole poem.

THE BRIDE OF ABYDOS

In a letter to a friend, he himself notes the nature of its composition "for the sake of employment", decrying the rapid production of poor verse for commercial gain. However he returned and revised *The Bride* many times. The plot of *The Bride* is rather simple when compared to his other works at the time, Byron experiments with the meter and language. The characters in *The Bride of Abydos* are of a simple stock. There are four characters, Giaffir and Zuleika, the former an embodiment for death and destruction, the other for love, and Selim and Haroun, both balanced in death and love, the former party to both while Haroun is to neither. The narrator is a mostly impersonal, omniscient.



The portraits of women in
the Oriental Tales






Byron addressed *the problems of traditional relationships between men and women*, based on fixed power structures.

The paradigm of the unseen, silent, and entirely passive Eastern female spoken briefly of in Childe Harold canto 2 is taken to the extreme in the lifeless form of Leila in **The Giaour**. Leila is allegorically representative of the captive, subject status of Ottoman-occupied Greece.

The Bride of Abydos breaks with the motif of absolute female passivity. In The Bride (where, true to Byron's habit of misleading titles, there is ultimately no such figure) the narrative tells of a Turkish woman's attempts to rebel against patriarchal dictatorship and escape forced marriage into a Harem.



In **The Corsair** Byron begins fully to develop the motif of the radically active heroine. Gulnare, the seductive harem 24 slave, plays upon Conrad's chivalric spirit, in order to save herself and him, she prompts a series of actions that shatters the authority and sanctity attaching to convention and tradition within the Eastern harem.



- Byron's poetic angst over the loss of classical virtues and his interest in the struggle for Greek independence unite together in the Oriental Tales
- Byron frequently and self-consciously employs diction in the Tales that is taken from Arabic speech, as well as from the more familiar Turkish idiom.



[7]



Although Byron's initial intent of "Orientalism" carried a positive and reflective connotation, the use of the term itself was radically altered by the work of noted literary critic, Edward Said. His volume, *Orientalism*, reappropriates the word to signify a fictional construct of the East by Western minds. This definition of "Orientalism" suggests that the literate, capitalist society of Europe utilized the vast differences between itself and the "Orient" to reinforce its own idea of superiority and justify many heinous practices enacted by empire towards the cultures of the East.

Byron, by contrast, interpreted Orientalism as a fertile ground in which important ideas about British identity could germinate. The two connotations of the term seem to be opposite sides of the same coin, only separated by the fact that Byron's Orientalism looks to the hopeful future, and Said's Orientalism looks to a tragic past.





THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!



Select Bibliography

Franklin, Michael J. "Accessing India." in *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire 1780-1830*. Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson, eds. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.

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Marshall, William H. *The Structure of Byron's Major Poems*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. p45.



The used paintings

1. Aivazovsky - View of Constantinople and the Bosphorus
2. Portrait of a Young Oriental Woman by Eugène Devéria (French, 1805-1865)
3. Charles Wynne Nicholls The Parting Of Conrad And Medora
4. Medora Watching the Return of Conrad by anonymous engraver, illustrating Byron's poem *The Corsair*, The Byron and Moore Gallery, 1871
5. The Bride of Abydos (French – *La Fiancée d'Abydos*) or *Selim and Zuleika* is the title of two works by Eugène Delacroix, one in the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon (pre-1849) and another in the Louvre (1843–1849)
6. Medora by anonymous engraver, illustrating Byron's poem *The Corsair*, The Byron and Moore Gallery, 1871
7. Holy Friday, Greece by Theodore Jacques Ralli, 1852 – 1909
8. Taken from the book *Albany Institute of History & Art: 200 Years of Collecting*