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P.C.
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ABBREVIATIONS

To economize on space in the notes, the following abbreviations are used for the books referred to. See the Bibliography for further information.


BoA: Byron, *The Bride of Abydos*.


CHP: Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.


DJ: Byron, *Don Juan*.


Sale: *The Koran, Commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed, translated by George Sale*, 1734, *Preliminary Discourse*.


SoC: Byron, *The Siege of Corinth*.


BYRON’S ORIENTALISM

Peter Cochran

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. If Thomas Moore’s Zoroastrian Fire-Worshippers in *Lalla Rookh* may be interpreted as a metaphor for Catholics, and if his Moslems may stand for oppressive Protestants, then Ireland – to England’s West – is honorary Oriental territory (see the essay below by Alan Gregory). If we grant that, why should the barbarous and strange highland reaches depicted by Scott in his poems and in the Waverley Novels not be considered Oriental too? Byron, we know, associated both Greece and Albania with Scotland. Aztec Mexico, as portrayed by Southey in *Madoc*, is still more barbarous and strange. Having thus granted the West and the North Oriental status, what of the South Pacific, as portrayed by Byron in *The Island*? The Scots Torquil and the Polynesian Neuha are both “children of the isles”. Toobonai is not so much to the East as to the South-East, not so much to the South-East as on the other side of the globe: but it offers what all self-respecting Oriental scenery does, namely, a depiction of territory which, whatever it is, is emphatically *not* Anglo-Saxon, Tory, Anglican, imperialist, or full of cant.

However, in this introductory essay, I mostly interpret “Oriental” in the narrow sense of “Eastern”; and naively, “Islamic Eastern”. I am aware that there were other areas of Orientalism – Armenian, for example – in which Byron was interested, but the Islamic East informs the largest portion of the poetry he wrote deriving from the subject – as well, of course, as being the one most relevant to our concerns today.

There have been, in modern orientalist writings, a number of cant approaches hurled up, which try define what the “Orient” is. The Orient, says one of the most influential, is an object, an Other, which you, the subject, wish to “possess” and “penetrate”. This crude sexual formula may be applied to any

---

1: “He loved the mountains of Greece, because they recalled those of Scotland” (Teresa Guiccioli, *My Recollections of Lord Byron, and those of Eye-Witnesses of his Life*, tr Jerningham, New York 1869 p.359.) “The Arnaouts, or Albanese, struck me forcibly by their resemblance to the Highlanders of Scotland” (CHP II, st. 38, Byron’s note).
narrative in which an occidental male possesses and penetrates an oriental female, and enables the narrative to be used as a metaphor for western imperialist expansion into and forcible domination of eastern countries. The fact that many oriental females might (if approached tactfully), enjoy being penetrated and possessed by occidental males, is left out of the scenario as an embarrassment to the political metaphor.

Opponents of such an approach, aware of the advantages of cultural variety, write of the Orient as a place in which one can redefine one’s self in new ways, not so much by penetrating and possessing it, as by “encountering” it, and in doing so, newly discovering oneself:

… if Orientalism is, for us, an “antiworld,” a lush and necessary Other “against which we pit ourselves for definition,” Byronic Orientalism involves a pitting of self against self.3

This may lead to a recognition that cultural variety is only skin-deep, so that the boundaries between “occidental self and oriental other” often blur, and the line between hitherto Eurocentric Self and Oriental Other becomes hard to see. The myth of Eurosupremacy loses its power in this version. The Orient is, or becomes, you. The “Eurocentric binary of self and other” becomes indistinct and disappears. East is West, and vice versa. There may be comic potential in this discovery that Orient and Occident are identical.

The Orient can also be a place of violence, of oppression, or contrariwise of romance, of lost innocence recovered, or of paradisal strangeness. But it can also be a place of romantic disillusion, of innocence lost all over again, or of paradisal strangeness evaporated: a subject not for romance but for satire, where the disparity between ideal and real is, again, a source of laughter. In the Orient, everything is revealed as having the capacity to transmute into its complementary opposite – as happens in the Forest of Arden, or Bohemia, or Cyprus.

Now in order to discover the disparity between the Ideal and the Real, or for things to dissolve into their complementary opposites, or for the Binarism of Self and Other to evaporate, one often has in real life only to cross the road, or open an envelope, or go into the next room. It’s true that Ireland and even Scotland were a lot further away from the metropolis then than they are now; but the specifically Oriental version of such a voyage of spiritual discovery should really involve adventures in eastern countries. The psychological adventures which Orientalism offers in theory are much more adventurous if

we believe in the detailed presentation of the Oriental environment in which they occur.

All these definitions and approaches are useful when discussing the life and works of Lord Byron. Byron’s Orientalism is often praised, and used as a contrast with that of other “romantic” writers, because it was based on experience. While I do not deny the authenticity of his experience – feel, indeed, that it has been insufficiently examined – my argument will be that he also derived much of his knowledge of the orient from books. I think that at first he 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.

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. Here, from Pulci’s *Morgante Maggiore* (the first book of which Byron translated), is Orlando speaking to the giant Marcovaldo, whom he has wounded fatally:

```
Disse Orlando: – Da poi che tu mel chiedi
per grazia, io userò mia cortesia:
io sono Orlando; e questo che tu vedi,
è mio scudier, ch’è meco in compagnia.
Tu se’ morto e dannato, s’ tu non credi
presto a Colui che nacque di Maria;
battèzati a Gesù, credi al Vangelò,
acciò che l’alam tue ne vadi in cielo.
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Macometto t’aspetta nello ’nferno
cogli altri matti che van drieto a lui,
dove tu arderai nel foco eterno,
giù negli abissi dolorosi e bui. –
Disse il pagan: – Laudato in sempiterno
sia Gesù Cristo e tutti i santi sui!
Io voglio in ogni modo battezarmi,
e per tua mano, Orlando, cristian farmi.4
```

Orlando said, “Since you, from kindness, ask me to speak, I shall reply courteously. I am Orlando, and this whom you see is my squire [Morgante, another giant], who goes with me. You’re dead and damned if you don’t quickly believe in Him who was born of Mary; be baptized in Christ, believe in the Gospel, so that you can see your soul go to Heaven. / Mahommed, with all the other idiots who make up his train, is waiting for you in Hell, where you will burn in eternal fire, down there in the dark and miserable abyss.” – The pagan said, “May Jesus and all his saints be praised eternally! I want to be baptised at once, and to be made a Christian, Orlando, by your hand”.

This is so crude that one suspects a game is being played, and that the priests were right to look at Pulci askance. The Islamic viewpoint could not be entertained in these times, except perhaps as one side of a formal balance:

Poi che de l’arme la seconda eletta
si diè al campion del populo pagano,
duo sacerdoti, l’un de l’una setta,
l’altro de l’altra, uscir coi libri in mano.
In quel del nostro è la vita perfetta
scritta di Cristo; e l’altro è l’Alcorano.
Con quel de l’Evangelio si fe’ inante
l’imperator, con l’altro il re Agramante.

The pagan champion was given the second choice of weapons, then two priests stepped forth, one from either sect, book in hand. The book our priest held contained the unblemished life of Christ; the other’s book was the Koran. With the priest of the gospel stepped forth the emperor [Charlemagne]; with the other, King Agramant.

Several of the protagonists of Ariosto, a poet whom Byron admired and imitated, seem, from their places of origin, to be Muslim (Ruggiero, Rodomonte, or Marfisa, for instance), but the fact worries Ariosto not a whit: they never threaten Jerusalem, never wash themselves ritually, and never pray towards Mecca. A Moslem warrior might be honoured for his or her courage, but he or she must be defeated, as is Rodomonte, or converted – as are Ruggiero and Marfisa.

The less light-hearted and more pious Tasso, whom Byron also studied, allows no real “Saracen” heroes, and his “Saracen” heroine, Clorinda, must convert before she dies. His Moslems, who possession of Jerusalem is
threatened, are likely to be called “Arabi predatori,”6 “pagani,” or even “palestini”,7 and to be described as worshipping “Macone” as often as “Maometto”. Whether they adhere to Islam, or to the devil, or to what they adhere, is outside Tasso’s field of interest. We can only be allowed to sympathise with them when they’ve been defeated. Tasso is unwilling sometimes even to give them coherent speech:

Tacque; e ‘l pagano, al sofferir poco uso,  
morde le labra e di furor si struggge.  
Risponder vuol, ma il suono esce confuso  
si come strido d’animal che rugge;  
o come apre le nubi ond’egli è chiuso  
impetuoso il fulmine, e se ’n fugge,  
cosi pareva a forza ogni suo detto  
tonando uscir da l’infiammato petto.

This is rendered by Edward Fairfax as

The Pagan patience never knew, nor used,  
Trembling for ire, his sandy locks he tore,  
Out from his lips flew such a sound confused,  
As lions make in deserts thick, which roar;  
Or as when clouds together crushed and bruised,  
Pour down a tempest by the Caspian shore;  
So was his speech imperfect, stopped, and broken,  
He roared and thundered when he should have spoken.8

Detailed discussion of the differences between the two warring religions form no part of either writer’s intention.  
However, by 1812, when Childe Harold II, the first of Byron’s oriental poems, was published, the western perspective on the east had altered, at least in so far as academic studies were concerned. The threat to Europe from the Ottomans had long receded. In the late seventeenth century Barthélemy D’Herbelot, in the eighteenth Sir William Jones (see below), George Sale the translator of the Qu’ran, and John Richardson the translator of the Arabian Nights, had all demystified Islam to the extent that it was harder to regard it with the horror which made Dante deposit Mohammed in Hell,9 and was necessary to be more explicit about what belief in Islam involved. Despite this

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6: Tasso, Geusalemme Liberata. 5.92,8.  
8: Tasso, Ger.Lib. 6.38. Translation by Edward Fairfax (1600).  
9: Dante, Inf. 38.
increase in detailed understanding, there was no real increase in sympathy: instead of the cliché evil East of medieval tradition, a new cliché East emerged, which was still mysterious – full of houris, odalisques, eunuchs and djinns, crafty caliphs, oppressive sheikhs and flying carpets – only to an extent a surreal version of western society, but still much more commodifiable than its dark predecessor. A market was created which Robert Southey, Byron’s most hated enemy, attempted to exploit, with little success, either artistic or monetary, with his epics Thalaba the Destroyer (1801), and The Curse of Kehama (1810). Thalaba, as Tim Fulford points out, derives both from William Beckford’s novel Vathek (1786), and from Walter Savage Landor’s poem Gebir (1798). Byron, in his turn, borrowed, as we shall see, from Vathek (it was his favourite book), with greater success either than Southey, or Shelley, whose The Revolt of Islam appeared in 1817 – although Shelley, understating, admits that he does not make “much attempt at minute delineation of Mahometan manners”. Southey, Byron and Shelley all wrote in the pseudo-orientalist tradition which Beckford had developed from an earlier eighteenth-century one. Shelley was in addition a fervent admirer of Gebir: Byron, in his preface to The Vision of Judgement, satirised it. Shelley, who loathed Christianity, could not be expected to admire Islam; Byron, who respected Christianity as long as it was divorced from English cant, was much more friendly to its fellow-monotheism.

The example of Sir William Jones

The great scholar William Jones (1746-94) set himself, while a student at Oxford, the task of translating (with assistance) The Arabian Nights from their French version back into Arabic. Nicknamed “Selim,” his extraordinary achievements in Orientalism, made in part in India, may usefully be summarised here, as a way of getting Byron’s initial amateurishness in the same subject into perspective. He thought that a thorough knowledge of Eastern culture would be a useful counterweight to Graeco-Roman traditions, a narrow adherence to which he found provincial and chauvinistic – as, of course, Byron did, or affected to do. His multitudinous translations, from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Sanscrit, were done with a view to achieving that end. It was through his work that Byron claimed to have became early familiar with such poets as Sa‘di, Ferdausi and Hafiz. Jones combined encyclopaedic oriental knowledge with a

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10: Fulford at Pratt 3, p.viii.
radical domestic Whiggism closer to Cobbett’s than to Byron’s (though in India he favoured despotism). At the same time he was aware of the supposedly delicate sensibilities of his readers, “silently heterosexualised” some of the poems he translated (the phrase is Michael Franklin’s: see below), and understated the traditional natures of such Hindu entities as Kali. His translation of the Sanscrit play Sacontalā went through six editions between 1790 and 1807. He was also an expert on Hindu and Islamic law.

Jones’s work was much appreciated in India itself, where, as Michael Franklin writes,

Orientalism, through its retrieval of Sanskrit texts and its reconstruction of India’s past, shaped the way Indians perceived themselves, ushering in the Bengali Renaissance … Although a key member of the colonial administration, Jones’s Enlightenment aspirations were ultimately to work in the service of Indian nationalism.13

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in The Discovery of India that “… to Jones and many other European scholars, India owes a deep debt of gratitude for the rediscovery of her past literature”.14

Byron knew Jones’ labours well, having read Baron Teignmouth’s Life (1799),15 and, we may assume, the six-volume Works to which it was attached. He expressed an initial desire to travel, not to the Eastern Mediterranean, but to India;16 but was thwarted by officialdom. His scholarship pales into insignificance next to that of Jones; though clearly he had poetic talents much greater than Jones’s. What no-one has said of his Orientalism is that it heightened, as Jones’s did, a national sense of identity in the non-Christian countries he wrote about. Turkish and Arabic translations of his works have been few, and the Islamic critical response to his work has, in 2005, barely begun.17

14: Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (London: Meridian, 1945), p.266. I am grateful to Andrew Rudd for drawing my attention to this quotation.
15: CMP, 5.
16: BLJ I, 175.
Robert Southey was happy, in correspondence, to describe Indian language, in the most un-Jonesian way, as “a baboon jargon,” as if there were only one. 18 He wrote The Curse of Kehama against a background of controversy over English Christian missionary work in India, which he came to support, with less and less toleration of the religions such work would, if successful, supplant. 19 Both imperialism and evangelism found a much more stalwart defender in Southey than in any of his orientalist rivals. “Kehama,” writes its modern editor, “offers itself implicitly as an instrument of colonialist policy”. 20

Little of this strange material sold well, apart from Byron’s. Of the orientalist works of Byron’s contemporaries, 21 only Moore’s Lalla Rookh was in commercial competition with him, and Lalla Rookh – though it’s still, I’m told, very popular in India – does not seem to have stood the test of time in the West (see Allan Gregory’s paper below).

On the other hand, Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, (published at Byron’s insistence, its subject influenced by Southey), 22 has stood the test of time with more success than much of Byron’s: but is not an oriental narrative in quite the same way as his are; and is not Islamic.

Coleridge had been as far as Malta; but of all other the writers in this interrelated sequence, only Byron had visited any oriental countries. All the others wrote about an Orient which they knew only from books. Southey, especially, as Fulford writes,

… developed Thalaba as an imitation of ‘Oriental’ tales that were already tales made in Europe. His poem … grew from western fantasies about the East and had at its root the desire to use the Orient as an exotic other – a stage on which the dilemmas produced in the west could be played out. 23

The question is, does Byron do the same – dress up Occidental drama in Oriental clothing? Or are his tales more authentically Oriental? Are we naïve to look to his poems for an understanding of the East in his day – is he just playing a game with our gullibility? When, writing to Shelley in 1822, he called his

18: CSL II, 96-7, quoted Daniel Sanjiv Roberts at Pratt 4, p.x.
23: Fulford at Pratt 3, p.x.
earlier work “exaggerated nonsense which has corrupted the public taste,” was he referring only to their style?

Landor and Southey invert the theme of *Vathek*: instead of charting with fixation and strange empathy the downward path of a ghastly, faintly comical transgressor, they celebrate the defeat of such a one at the hands of a pure hero. In so far as the theme of Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam* is comprehensible, he follows them rather than Beckford. If we are looking for a Western subtext to their Eastern texts, anti-imperialist messages are implicit in the work of all three, with either Napoleonic or Tory imperialism as the foe.

But Byron celebrates the defeat of a hero – never a pure one – at the hands, either of a cruel establishment, as in *The Bride of Abydos*, or through the hero’s own compromised politics, as in *The Siege of Corinth*, or through his compromised sexuality, as in *The Giaour*, or through a mixture of all three. His is a less easily bracketable version of orientalism.

In his 1807 reading list, Byron includes the following entry:

Arabia, Mahomet, whose Koran contains most sublime poetical passages far surpassing European Poetry.\(^{25}\)

This may be teenage posture (he was nineteen in 1807): or he may have been reading George Sale’s *Preliminary Discourse*:

The style of the Korân is generally beautiful and fluent, especially where it imitates the prophetic manner, and scripture phrases. It is concise, and often obscure, adorned with bold figures after the eastern taste, enlivened with florid and sententious expressions, and in many places, especially where the majesty and attributes of GOD are described, sublime and magnificent … Very extraordinary effects are related of the power of words well chosen and artfully placed, which are no less powerful either to ravish or amaze than music itself … \(^{26}\)

I have to confess that it’s not clear to me that Byron read Sale’s translation of the Qu’ran. Jerome McGann finds echoes, but they are doubtful;\(^ {27}\) and we

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\(^{24}\): BLJ IX, 161.

\(^{25}\): CMP, 1.

\(^{26}\): Sale, pp.61 and 62.

\(^{27}\): See CPW III 419 and 420 (*Giaour*, B.’s notes to 488 and 748: McGann’s references are to Sale 59 and 101, women in paradise, and Eblis), and III 441, (*BoA*, Byron’s note to II 409, or 891: McGann’s reference is to Sale sec I: paradise). The page references do not
never find Sale mentioned either in the Letters and Journals, or the sale catalogues. However, I have proceeded on the charitable assumption that Byron at least knew Sale’s Preliminary Discourse.

Had he relied on such authorities as Voltaire (whom we know he respected), he would have found the following, relative to the Qu’ran:

Il est vrai que les contradictions, les absurdités, les anachronismes, sont répandus en foule dans ce livre. On y voit surtout une ignorance profonde de la physique la plus simple et la plus connue. C’est là la pierre de touche des livres que les fausses religions prétendent écrits par la Divinité, car Dieu n’est ni absurde, ni ignorant; mais le peuple, qui ne voit pas ces fautes, les adore, et les imans emploient un déluge de paroles pour les pallier.

It is true that this book is crowded with contradictions, absurdities, and anachronisms. In it we see, above all, a deep ignorance about the simplest and most well-known aspects of physical science. It is the touchstone for all books which false religions pretend to be written by the Divinity, for God is neither so absurd nor so ignorant; but the people, who do not see these faults, adore them, and the imams use a flood of words to make them acceptable.

Despite these worries about the second-hand nature of Byron’s “Oriental” knowledge, Byron’s supporters are confident about the depth of his eastern study. Mohammed Sharafuddin writes that “Even if Byron is exaggerating his precociousness, the range and depth of his [oriental] reading cannot be doubted”. Sharafuddin dwells at length, especially, on Byron’s reading of the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Abdur Raheem Kidwai praises Byron’s “eye for detail, his meticulous accuracy, and his positive appreciation of the Orient”. Naji B. Oueijan goes further still:

Among his contemporaries Lord Byron was the only Englishman who truly experienced the Orient by assimilating himself into the culture … Unlike those who actually toured the East for merely political and/or religious propaganda and presented distorted images of the Eastern world and its peoples, or those who for purely academic reasons employed their time in recording their

tally with anything on those pages in Sale. In fact McGann takes all three from the notes of Coleridge (see Coleridge III, 110, 121, and 197) and Coleridge uses the 1880 translation of E.H.Palmer, as well as an 1877 Sale, which McGann does not state.

28: “I hope you and Bland roll down the stream of Sale” (BLJ I, 241) refers to the book market.
31: Kidwai, p.30.
observations of its antiquities and archaeology, Byron spent his time in living, enjoying, and studying Oriental life and culture for its own wealth as well as for its existing exoticism.\(^{32}\)

For more on these three critics, see below.

Nevertheless, in a letter to Murray of December 1814\(^{33}\) Byron asks if it is Mecca or Medina that contains the “\textit{holy} sepulchre”; and laments that, as “a good Mussulman,” he doesn’t know. His facetiousness may be crafted for the innocent publisher. Since he had no respect for the canting model of Christianity, and was a dabbler also in neo-Platonism and Zoroastrianism, both of which he eventually jettisoned too, we have no reason to think he held Islam in any regard in terms of his own salvation. But not to know that Mohammed is buried in Mdina is like wondering if St Peter’s is in Rome or Venice.\(^{34}\) Would Murray have been sufficiently sophisticated to see that? Is Byron trying it on, or is he really so ignorant? Just how careful he was with eastern material, in the face of a readership he despised, is an important point.

In his essay below, Seyed Mohammed Marandi makes some damaging points about the way Byron portrays Islamic society in \textit{The Bride of Abydos}. Amongst other things he points out that Byron treats Islam as monolithic, speaking of Ottoman society as if there were no other kinds in Islam: that he is wrong about Islamic ideas of the female soul; wrong about women not being allowed near Islamic shrines: wrong about dowries: that he would have us believe that all Moslem fathers are tyrannical, that all young Moslem women harbour incestuous feelings, and that the only civic virtues in the Islamic world are ones which come fortuitously from one’s having Greek blood (Greece being by convention a western society, despite the evidence).

If these points are upheld, then Byron was pulling the wool over his readers’ eyes about his orientalist understanding, and has been ever since. He had, we know, a low opinion of most of his readers.

However, his seeming positive attitude to Islam would have been fostered and reinforced by \textit{Vathek}, in which the sins of the protagonist are measured against Islamic, not Christian, moral standards. But is \textit{Vathek’s} orientalism any more than a huge camp gesture?

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\(^{32}\) Oueijan, p.18.

\(^{33}\) BLJ III, 191.

\(^{34}\) Byron would have learned the place of Mohammed’s burial from Sale, p.3 (and p.5n); or from Castellan’s \textit{Moeurs ... des Othmans}, I, p.42 (1, pp.xix-xxj in original French).
The Giaour, alone among Byron’s tales, is told in part from an Islamic viewpoint (see especially lines 723-46): and Byron enters into the spirit of, and seems master of a Moslem’s perspective. He knows enough to see that in killing Hassan, the Giaour has destroyed a fount of Islamic virtue, of which he, Byron, has had personal experience:

I need hardly observe, that Charity and Hospitality are the first duties enjoined by Mahomet; and to say truth, very generally practised by his disciples. The first praise that can be bestowed on a chief, is a panegyric on his bounty; the next, on his valour.35

There needs no very profound or lasting knowledge of Islam to know these things; and in any case, it’s not Mohammed who enjoins hospitality in the Qu’ran, but Allah, speaking through Mohammed. It’s not as if charity and hospitality are frowned on in Christian countries, either. However, George Sale, in his Preliminary Discourse, underlines the idea:

Hospitality was so habitual to them [the pre-Mohammedan Arabs], and so much esteemed, that the examples of this kind among them exceed whatever can be produced from other nations.36

Nevertheless, Byron’s note wears its anti-occidental polemic with some self-consciousness.

Byron’s eastern poems are famous for their “local colour” – in flaunting this they echo, as I think Byron meant them to, Scott’s familiarity with archaic Scots words as shown in The Lay of the Last Minstrel, which is replete with “minivers” and “bartizans,” “cleuchs” and “actons,” “jennets,” “cushat-doves” and “need-fires”. Byron enjoyed using intriguingly similar oriental vocabulary, whose meaning only he could elucidate, via prose notes, thus emphasising his role as bold traveller, and expert in unknown areas that fascinated and thrilled. “Palampores” and “caïques”, “tophaikes” and “djereeds”, “ataghans” and “chaius’s” litter The Giaour and The Bride of Abydos (though not The Corsair or The Siege of Corinth). My suspicion is that he saw Scott’s game, and knew he could take the same game further afield. But displaying your knowledge of what djereeds and ataghans are, and claiming thereby an intimacy with Islamic culture, is like having your photo taken on the Rialto and saying how well you know Venice. Byron, via Shakespeare, later mocks people, including himself, who do the latter:

35: The Giaour, Byron’s note to line 35.
36: Sale, p.29.
Motto. Rosalind. – “Farewell, Monsieur Traveller; look you lisp and wear strange suits, disable all the benefits of your own country, be out of love with your nativity, and almost chide God for making you that countenance you are; or I will scarce think that you have swam in a gondola. – *As You Like It*, Act 4. Scene 1.37

It could be addressed to Childe Harold. The earlier Byron is keen to know that he has “swam in a gondola,” Islamic fashion: yet he sometimes displays the greatest ignorance. Here is *The Giaour*, 487-90:

Oh! Who young Leila’s glance could read  
And keep that portion of his creed,  
Which saith that woman is but dust,  
A soulless toy for tyrant’s lust? 490

Next to these lines he places a note:

A vulgar error; the Koran allots at least a third of Paradise to well-behaved women; but by far the greatest number of Mussulmans interpret the text in their own way, and exclude their moieties from heaven. Being enemies to Platonics, they cannot discern “any fitness of things” in the souls of the other sex, conceiving them to be superseded by the Houris.

He has one good point, for Islamic theory and Islamic practise often differ; but has created an alternative “vulgar error” of his own, for the Qu’ran puts no limit on the proportion of women who may enter Paradise:

Verily the devout Moslems of either sex, and the true believers of either sex, and the devout men, and the devout women, and the men of veracity, and the women of veracity, and the patient men, and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the alms-givers of either sex, and the men who fast and the women who fast, and the chaste men, and the chaste women, and those of either sex who remember God frequently; for them hath God prepared forgiveness, and a great reward.38

I don’t know where Byron got his “thirty-three percent only” idea from,39 but I suspect from his own misogyny and uncontrollable desire to “hum”. He would have found the following in Sale’s *Preliminary Discourse*:

37: *Beppo*, epigraph.  
38: Sale, 1734, p.346. The verse is Q 33.35.  
39: Harold Wiener (see below) sees a remote source in Sale’s *Preliminary Discourse* to the Qu’ran; but the passage he quotes says nothing about “a third” of women. In their
… the same prophet [Mohammed] has also declared, that when he took a view of paradise, he saw the majority of its inhabitants to be the poor, and when he looked down into hell, he saw the greater part of the wretches confined there, to be women.40

But, to counterbalance this poor impression:

Before we quit this subject, it may not be improper to observe the falsehood of a vulgar imputation on the Mohammedans, who are by several writers reported to hold that women have no souls, or, if they have, that they will perish, like those of brute beasts, and will not be rewarded in the next life. But whatever may be the opinion of some ignorant people among them, it is certain that Mohammed had too great a respect for the fair sex to teach such a doctrine; and that there are several passages in the Korân which affirm that women, in the next life, will not only be punished for their evil actions, but will also receive the rewards for their good deeds, as well as the men, and that in this case GOD will make no distinction of sexes. [note: see Kor. c. 3 p. 58 c. 4 p. 76. And also c. 13, 16, 40, 48, 57 &c.] It is true, the general notion is, that they will not be admitted into the same abode as the men are, because their places will be supplied by the paradisiacal females, (tho’ some allow that a man will there also have the company of those who were his wives in this world, or at least such of them as he shall desire;) but that good women will go into a separate place of happiness, where they will enjoy all sorts of delights; but whether one of those delights will be the enjoyment of agreeable paramours created for them, to compleat the œconomy of the Mohammedan system, is what I have no where found decided. One circumstance relating to these beatified females, conformable to what he had asserted of the men, he acquainted his followers with in the answer he returned to an old woman; who desiring him to intercede with GOD, that she might be admitted into paradise, he told her that no old woman would enter that place; which setting the poor woman a crying, he explained himself by saying, that GOD would make her young again.41

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (whom Byron read and admired: see DJ V, 3, 8), has an impressive section on Islamic women and their chances of paradise:

As to your next enquiry, I assure you it is certainly false, though commonly believed in our parts of the world, that Mahomet excludes women from any share in a future happy state. He was too much a gentleman, and

40: Sale, p.98.
41: Sale, pp.102-3.
loved the fair sex so well, to use them so barbarously. On the contrary, he promises a very fine paradise to the Turkish women. He says, indeed, that this paradise will be a separate place from that of their husbands; but I fancy the most part of them won’t like it the worse for that; and that the regret of this separation will not render their paradise the less agreeable. It remains to tell you, that the virtues that Mahomet requires of the women, to merit the enjoyment of future happiness, are not to live in such a manner as to become useless to the world, but to employ themselves, as much as possible, in making little Mussulmans. The virgins who die virgins, and the widows who marry not again, dying in mortal sin, are excluded out of paradise: for women, says he, not being capable to manage the affairs of state, nor to support the fatigues of war, God has not ordered them to govern or reform the world; but he has entrusted them with an office which is not less honourable, even that of multiplying the human race, and such as, out of malice or laziness, do not make it their business to bear or to breed children, fulfil not the duty of their vocation, and rebel against the commands of God. Here are maxims for you, prodigiously contrary to those of your convents. What will become of your St. Catharines, your St. Theresas, your St. Clares, and the whole bead-roll of your holy virgins and widows? who, if they are to be judged by this system of virtue, will be found to have been infamous creatures, that passed their whole lives in a most abominable libertinism.42

If therefore Byron’s oriental women – in the ottava rima poems at least – appear more libidinous than his occidental ones, they could almost claim divine sanction for it. Donna Julia (part Moorish), Haidee (half Moorish), and Gulbeyaz (entirely Turkish) wouldn’t have merely their genes to blame. It would perhaps have pleased Byron (who was unhappy with the body), to read in Sale that in Mohammed’s paradise the blessed will need neither “to ease themselves, nor even blow their noses, for that all superfluities will be discharged and carried off by perspiration, or a sweat as odouriferous as musk”43 – but he never mentions it.

An author who denied any value to Eastern poetry, religion, or ethics, was Southey, who wrote poems about the East on behalf of the East, in the imperialist conviction that it couldn’t write them about itself; that it couldn’t make sense at all, indeed, unless a westerner wrote about it. Byron had been engaging in covert dialogue with Southey about the East long before the two

came into public contact, and before he thought of going on his own eastern journey. Southey had written Thalaba despite an innate literary distaste:

It had been easy to have made Zeinab [an early heroine in Thalaba] speak from the Koran, if the tame language of the Koran could be remembered by the few who have toiled through its dull tautology.\(^\text{44}\)

Byron had read Thalaba by 1807\(^\text{45}\) when he wrote out his own juvenile reading list. In a later note by Southey to Thalaba Book 1, he would have found

A waste of ornament and labour characterises all the work of the orientalists ... The little of their literature that has reached us is ... worthless. Our barbarian scholars have called Ferdusi the Oriental Homer ... To make this Iliad of the East, as they have sacrilegiously styled it, a good poem, would be realising the dreams of alchemy, and transmuting lead into gold.

The Arabian Tales certainly abound with genius; they have lost their metaphorical rubbish in passing through the filter of a French translation.\(^\text{46}\)

Southey ignores the question, “Is Homer an occidental or an oriental poet? The Odyssey centres on a Greek island, the Iliad on a city in Asia …” and it’s clear that he thought the poets of the east could only become great after having been re-written by western ones, and not always then: Thalaba, his “Islamic” poem, and The Curse of Kehama, his “Hindu” poem, must therefore be seen as gifts to the East, epics of which the indigenous poets were incapable (he planned a Zoroastrian epic, too).

Byron again disagreed. He listed further among his early reading:

Ferdausi, author of the Shah Nameh the Persian Iliad, Sadi, and Hafiz, the immortal Hafiz the oriental Anacreon ...\(^\text{47}\)

The implication here is that he is fluent in Persian; few think he was. The conflict which was erupt in 1820 over A Vision and The Vision of Judgement is to be seen in embryo in Byron’s early clash with Southey over the value of eastern cultures.

\(^\text{44}\): Thalaba Book 1, n: Pratt 3, p.193.
\(^\text{45}\): See letter to Elizabeth Pigot, BLJ I, p.127.
\(^\text{46}\): Thalaba Book 1, n: Pratt 3, p.194.
\(^\text{47}\): CMP, 1. The influence on him of Jones’s translations is clear here: see BLJ III, 164.
The Islamic East in Byron’s day

It won’t help to imagine the Islamic world in 1809-24 as a mirror of today’s. Oil was not important, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not exist. The Saud family ruled oasis villages. Neither did Israel exist. By far the most important state was Ottoman Turkey, and all roads led to Constantinople (not yet renamed Istanbul). Greece, Albania, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq (“Mesopotamia”), and Egypt were all provinces of the Ottomans, as was most of what came to be called Yugoslavia. These were ruled with varying degrees of imperial strength and conviction: some pashas – such as Byron’s friend Ali – were virtually independent. North African states such as Libya (“Tripoli”), Tunisia, and Algeria, were all powerless Turkish colonies, often dominated by pirates, and as often prey to massive internal division and constant regime-change: one wag had it that in Tripoli there were often eight Deys every week. Morocco was more stable (Haidee’s mother was born in Fez). Despite occasional forays such as the abortive attack on Constantinople in February 1807, and the successful raid to free the European slaves in Algiers in August 1816, English imperialism was only interested in the area in so far as Bonapartist France was interested in it – as shown by the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, quickly neutralised by the English at the Battle of the Nile and the Siege of Acre, and the French occupation of the Ionian Islands, quickly overthrown by the English in 1809, with Byron’s visit to Ali Pacha as a collateral event.

The Turks were supreme, and supremely arrogant, not just over Greeks and Bulgarians, but even – asserts Byron – over their fellow-Moslems: “The Turks abhor the Arabs (who return the compliment a hundred-fold) even more than they hate the Christians”, he writes, in a note to The Bride of Abydos, line 144.

Threats to the hold Turkey had on her colonies, such as the one posed by the Greek War of Independence, were regarded with deep unease by the Tories who ruled England for most of Byron’s life, as threats to Legitimacy in general. The Ottoman Empire had, after all, always been there, and was probably preferable to a French or Russian alternative. The Wahhabi fundamentalist movement, begun in the eighteenth century by the scholar Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and temporarily defeated by Sultan Mahmoud II between 1812 and 1818, was noted, as a thing remote but interesting.

The Eastern Mediterranean – especially that part around Corfu and the other Ionians – was a gateway to India, in which the English were by contrast very interested; they had already thwarted French ambitions in India in the eighteenth century, and were now nervous, not about French encroachments towards it, but about Russian encroachments. Catherine the Great had
christened her eldest son Constantine with a view to putting him on the ancient Byzantine throne, after having defeated the Ottomans (two ambitions in which she never succeeded). Russia’s constant thrust towards Turkey – illustrated by the Siege of Ismail in *Don Juan* VI-VIII – was balanced by corresponding imperialist incursions into Ukraine and the Crimea, the invasions of the Caucasus, about which Pushkin and Lermontov wrote some of their most famous Byronic poetry and prose (chronicled by Svetlana Klimova in her paper below), and by the non-stop pressure which, still further eastwards, they kept up on Persia (Iran). Persia had experienced a considerable expansion under Nadir Shah (see *DJ* IX, st. 44), who conquered Afghanistan and India as far as Delhi, but who went crazy, and was assassinated. According to Byron (who may only have dragged him in for the sake of the rhyme, “trophy / Sophy / coffee”), he went mad from constipation. In fact Nadir Shah had, from whatever motives, attempted that much-to-be-desired thing, a synthesis of Sunni and Shia (a schism never mentioned by Byron), but his death put an end to the dream. For the second half of the eighteenth century, Persia had non-stop internal conflicts, only brought to a close in 1796. In March 1813 Byron entertained the idea of travelling to “Bagdad & Tahiran” with the Marquis of Sligo; but nothing came of it.

Greece was not a nation, and few mainland Greeks had any idea of patriotism. That was an idea cultivated by people in the diaspora like Hobhouse’s friend Adamatios Korais. Mainland Greeks owed their allegiance either to the Turks, or to their feudal leaders.

A tragic-comic spectacle was afforded by Venice, once a major imperialist power in the Eastern Mediterranean – as shown by Shakespeare in *Othello*, and by Byron in *The Siege of Corinth* – but now defeated, decayed, and prostituted by Napoleon to the Austrians, as implied in *Beppo*.

England’s foe was, until 1815, Bonapartist France, and in so far as the parallel imperialisms of Turkey and Russia also saw France as a threat, Turkey and Russia were friends of England – Christian Russia especially, alarming though her ambitions were in a longer perspective. Turkey was powerful, but so clearly disintegrating that she was held in contempt, even though she didn’t disintegrate for another century.

Despite the amount of study to which the specialists had subjected it in the previous century, the Islamic faith was in general little known about in the west, and Byron’s work added little to its profile. It was, then as now, a multifaceted and sophisticated system, varying in both practise and belief from country to country and from culture to culture. Byron – who despite his boasts and air of familiarity, never, I think, read the Qu’ran – still regarded Islam as

48: BLJ III, 27.