

THE THEME OF THE EAST IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** Of all the forms of literature drama is, perhaps, the most faithful reflection of contemporary life. The ideals and aspirations, the prejudices and fears, the social, cultural and ethical values of a society find eloquent expression in its drama. The Elizabethan drama, in particular, being the product of a buoyant and self-confident age, is uninhibited in expression. References to the East abound in almost all dramatists of the age. These references, taken together, tell a story—the story of how the West felt toward the East. The present study aims at dealing with characters from the East and the allusions to the East in the English dramas prose. This article describes some basic features of East in English literature.

**Key words:** East, orient, culture, Victorian orientalism, image, poetry, drama.

"Light is from the East," says one of the Greek proverbs. Indeed, the sun rises in the East. Enlightenment, the sun of the mind, was born in the East and went to the Maghrib. As noted by scientist N. Komilov, art and culture appeared in countries such as China, India, Central Asia, Arabia, and Egypt. However, the thought that harmed the Eastern world and made it a classic did not stay in its birthplace, but reached the West as the common property of the common mind of all mankind. He gave new inspirations to the temperate and peaceful land of the West. This back-and-forth between East and West continues to this day. The most famous scientists of today's Europe, who think objectively, see the decisive influence of Zoroastrianism, which opened its eyes on the borders of Khorezm, in the emergence of ancient culture. By its own decision, Western ancient culture entered history as an integral part of human thinking. Medieval Islamic science gave him a new life. He re-introduced dozens of geniuses such as Aristotle, Plato, Batlymus, Jolinus. In this world, Al-Khorazmi, Ahmad Farghani, Farabi, Beruni, Ibn Sina gave the world torches of thought. The West again followed the East. And the event that followed this law of continuity continued until the 15th century. Many Western artists were inspired by Eastern literature and traveled through Eastern ideas in their works.

Orientalism in the Victorian era has origins in two aspects of 18th-century European and British culture: first, the fascination with *The Arabian Nights* (translated into French by Antoine Galland in 1704), which was one of the first works to have purveyed to Western Europe the image of the Orient as a place of wonders, wealth, mystery, intrigue, romance, and danger; second, the Romantic visions of the Orient as represented in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George

Gordon, Lord Byron, and other Romantics as well as in Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*.

Victorian Orientalism was all pervasive: it is prominent in fiction by William Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling, but is also to be found in works by Benjamin Disraeli, George Eliot, Oscar Wilde, and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. In poetry Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* is a key text, but many works by Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning also show the influence of Orientalist tropes and ideas. In theater it is one of the constant strands of much popular drama and other forms of popular entertainment like panoramas and pageants, while travel writing from Charles Kingsley to Richard Burton, James Anthony Froude, and Mary Kingsley shows a wide variety of types of Orientalist figures and concepts, as do many works of both popular and children's literature. Underlying and uniting all these diverse manifestations of Victorian Orientalism is the imperialist philosophy articulated by writers as different as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx, supported by writings of anthropologists and race theorists such as James Cowles Pritchard and Robert Knox.

The *Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights* was a key text in purveying to Western Europe the image of the Orient as a place of wonders, wealth, mystery, intrigue, romance, and danger; it was translated into French by Antoine Galland in 1704–1717, and thereafter translated many times into English in the 19th century, notably by Edward Lane (1838–1841) and Richard Burton (1885–1886), among others. The work gradually came to be seen as a book for children, perhaps partly because, as Ross Ballaster speculates, in the period of imperialist expansion, “Oriental empire increasingly came to be identified as a primitive model of government superseded by new forms of European colonialism.” Certainly both William Wordsworth and Alfred Lord Tennyson recall the pleasure of reading the stories in their youth, and Dickens, who refers to the *Nights* very frequently, often associates them with both the world of the marvelous and the innocence and happiness of childhood.

The influence of *The Arabian Nights* was supplemented by that of such Romantic works as George Gordon, Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812, 1814, and 1816) and his six *Turkish Tales*: *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1814), later the subject of an 1857 painting by Eugène Delacroix), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814), *The Siege of Corinth* (1816), and *Parisina* (1816). These are noteworthy for the Byronic hero, but also for their treatment of Islam. *The Giaour* is told partly from an Islamic viewpoint, while *The Bride of Abydos*, set in the court of the Turkish Sultan, is a tale of palace intrigue, male rivalry, sex, and danger, the same elements that will later characterize Cantos V and VI of Byron's *Don Juan*, which take place in the Sultan's harem in Constantinople. Both Selim, the piratical chief in *The Bride of Abydos*, and Conrad, the protagonist of *The Corsair*, are given Islamic backgrounds and cultures. As Peter Cochran argues, all of Byron's *Turkish Tales* owe a debt to William Beckford's

Vathek (1786), of which he was a great admirer and which was reprinted later in the same year that *The Siege of Corinth* was published, that is, 1816. Moreover, as Nigel Leask argues, Byron's *Turkish Tales* represent a historical change in Europe's relation to the East. By the second decade of the 19th century, he argues, "European orientalism, like European colonialism" had become a part of "the civilizing mission ... [and] the expansionist dependence on colonial markets."

The image of the East in the Elizabethan drama is a biased and distorted one. Perhaps it could not be otherwise, because direct contact between the Christian West and Muslim East began with those unfortunate wars known as the Crusades. Differences of race and culture further widened the chasm between the two peoples and the possibilities of a compromise or understanding of some sort were never seriously thought of. The wars of swords and the wars of words continued for almost one thousand years—from the seventh to the seventeenth century. A tolerant outlook toward other people in spite of the differences in manners and opinions. was a concept beyond the comprehension of Medieval or Renaissance Europe. A cosmopolitan point of view was the product of a later age and it remains, to our day, more of a cherished ideal than a reality.

### References

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