

## BYRON'S ARABESQUE

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To assert that an appreciation of Byron's Orientalism is central to an understanding of his poetic practice is such a commonplace of Byron scholarship as to border on the banal. Critical exploration of the impact of Byron's Oriental reading on his own poetry, however, uncovers radical ways of considering the poet's Eastern Tales in terms of narrative strategy and gender dynamics. The focus of this article will be to illustrate the significance of Byron's reading of the Jonathan Scott's *Arabian Nights* (1811) for the construction of the poet's Oriental heroines. Byron's creative relationship with the *Nights* plays on the definition of 'Arabesque': the Eastern Tales both imitate Arabian stylistics in their Oriental costume (and so are *Arab like*), and also demonstrate Byron's reaction to the fancifully intertwined narrative of Scheherazade with his own strangely mixed, fantastic tales. As I shall go onto consider, Byron's development of his Oriental heroines reflects a markedly similar narrative pattern in the *Nights* themselves, the heroines becoming increasingly active as each set of tales progresses.

Of all the Romantic poets, Byron in particular held an unwaning enthusiasm for the Orient, both factual and fictional.<sup>1</sup> He boasted of knowing the entire of Ottoman History 'from Tangralopix, and afterwards Othman 1st to the peace of Passarowitz, in 1718 - the Battle of Crotzka in 1739 & the treaty between Russia &

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on Byron's Eastern reading see especially H. S. C. Wiener, 'Byron and the East: literary sources of the "Turkish Tales"' in Herbert Davies *et al* eds. *Nineteenth-Century Studies* (1940; reissued New York, 1968), pp. 89-129.

Turkey in 1790'<sup>2</sup>, and of reading 'All travels or histories or books upon the East I could meet with . . . before I was *ten years old*. I think the Arabian Nights first.'<sup>3</sup> Such precocious intellectual posturing – to be expected perhaps from a nineteen-year old Byron, fresh from Trinity College Cambridge – marked the beginning of an enduring fascination with the Orient. In a letter of August 28, 1813 he famously advised Thomas Moore to 'stick to the East',<sup>4</sup> believing the region to hold limitless imaginative possibilities.<sup>5</sup> Byron's decision to follow his own advice proved a shrewd poetical policy. And Byron, unlike Southey who experimented with both form *and* content, struck the right balance in offering Western narrative form dressed in Oriental costume. The oft-cited stanza from his later comic Tale, *Beppo*, self-ironizes the earlier 'easy' success of his tragic Tales:

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! (*Beppo*, 401-408)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Reading List' (1807), Andrew Nicholson eds., *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Isaac D'Israeli, *The Literary Character* vol. 1 of 2 (London, 1822), p. 102n.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie A. Marchand ed. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, vol. 3 of 13: '*Alas! the Love of Women!*' (London, 1974), p. 101. (Hereafter referred to as *BLJ*, followed by volume number and page number.)

<sup>5</sup> The honeymoon was close to being over in 1815, when Byron claimed to have 'apparently exhausted' the East's resources (*BLJ* V.45), though he returned to an ottoman setting for *Siege of Corinth* (1816) and Cantos V and VI of *Don Juan*, published 1821 and 1823 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. IV, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford, 1986), p. 145. All citations of Byron's poetry taken from *The Complete Poetical Works*, 7 vols., ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford, 1980-1993). Hereafter abbreviated to *CPW*, followed by volume number and page number.

The world did indeed delight in the swift publication of his tales, all six of which appeared in a little under three years of each other.<sup>7</sup> Conforming to his expectation of them, the public consumed Byron's Turkish delights with a seemingly insatiable appetite, *The Corsair* notoriously selling 10,000 copies on the first day of its publication. Yet Byron's familiarity with 'samples of the finest Orientalism' has been overstated: he was no Orientalist.<sup>8</sup> Despite sojourns in Albania and Greece,<sup>9</sup> he was not fluent in any of the Syriac languages; as Yohannan has indicated, 'The only genuinely Eastern tongue he ever learned was Armenian.'<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Byron's exposure to Eastern literature was predominantly via a Western filter. Arguably the most characteristic Eastern text that Byron would have had access to was the *Arabian Nights*, translated into English for the first time in 1706.<sup>11</sup> In his comprehensive essay on Byron's Eastern reading Wiener argues that:

The tales are quite unlike those of Byron, and we are forced to conclude that although the *Arabian Nights* awakened in Byron the desire to read and learn more about the East, they played no greater part in his literary career.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of this article is to consider more closely the part I believe the poet's reading of the *Arabian Nights* did indeed play in Byron's literary career. It is in the Tales that we have the most overt demonstration of the influence of the *Nights* on Byron as an adult poet. Parallels between all six of Byron's Oriental tales and the *Nights* are discernable, however, for the purposes of this article discussion will be

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<sup>7</sup> *The Giaour* was the first to meet the public gaze in March 1813, *Parisina* the last on February 13<sup>th</sup> 1816.

<sup>8</sup> Whilst the term is now inevitably haunted by its Saidian context, I here use it in the traditional sense, 'An expert in or student of oriental languages, history, culture, etc' (*OED* 'orientalist' n. 3. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00333786>> 02/07/10 at 14:23 ).

<sup>9</sup> His Grand tour took him to Albania and Greece between September 1809 and June 1811; he returned to Greece in August 1823, dying at Missolonghi in April 1824.

<sup>10</sup> John D. Yohannan, 'The Persian Poetry Fad in England, 1770-1825', *Comparative Literature* (1952), pp. 137-160 (p. 32).

<sup>11</sup> Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights* (Richmond, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> H. S. C. Wiener, 'Byron and the East: literary sources of the "Turkish Tales"', pp. 89-129 (p. 114).

limited to the first four of Byron's Turkish Tales: *The Giaour* and *Bride of Abydos* of 1813, and *The Corsair* and *Lara* of 1814.

Nearly every study of the influence of the *Nights* begins with a chronology of their English appearances.<sup>13</sup> Nigel Leask has already argued in his influential *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* that 'The great stimulus for the new taste in oriental literary commodities was undoubtedly the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*, translated into English from Galland's "translation" in the period 1704-12.'<sup>14</sup> As Leask indicates, Galland's 'translation' was far from straightforward, however, John Payne's comments of 1879 suggest that despite such a controversial reputation the text retains significant literary value:

Numerous as are the mistakes and inaccuracies, willful and involuntary, that deface it, there lives in it, if not the letter, emphatically the true spirit of Oriental romance, as seen by European observers through the intervening media of distance and difference; and his charming style, the fine flower of the literary manner of the eighteenth century . . .<sup>15</sup>

Or, as Borges evocatively phrases it: 'We, their mere anachronistic readers of the twentieth century, perceive only the cloying flavor of the eighteenth century in them and not the evaporated aroma of the Orient which two hundred years ago was their novelty and their glory.'<sup>16</sup> Certainly, Galland's *Nights* and responses to it tell us more about British Romanticism than the Orient. Southey regarded the 'intervening media

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<sup>13</sup> For a list of English translations, see Robert L. Mack's 'Select Chronology of the Oriental Tale and Related Writings in English' in his own ed., *Oriental Tales* (Oxford, 1992), p. lvi-lxi.

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 19. The first English translation was not actually available until 1706 (Sallis, p. 3), and the final two volumes of Galland's 12 vol. set in French did not appear until 1717, two years after his death; see Duncan B. Macdonald, 'A Bibliographic and Literary Study of the First Appearance of the *Arabian Nights* in Europe', *The Library Quarterly* 2.4 (1932), pp. 387-420 (p. 387).

<sup>15</sup> John Payne, 'The Thousand and One Nights I', *The New Quarterly Magazine* (January 1879), pp. 150-174 (p. 154).

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen et al (London, 2000), p. 93.

of distance and difference' as the essential ingredient in the *Nights* palatability, remarking that the *Arabian Nights* 'abound with genius' but only because 'they have lost their metaphorical rubbish in passing through the filter of a French translation'.<sup>17</sup> In a comparison of the *Nights* with select examples from Byron's Eastern oeuvre such as this, discussion of the developing nature of the *Nights* can be restricted to a consideration of which version would have been available to Byron during the composition of his Oriental costume poetry. Wiener reasonably concludes that though Byron may have read Galland in the original French, or in translation, 'It is most probable that during the preparation of the Turkish Tales he used the edition of Jonathan Scott' owing to the presence of that edition in Byron's library.<sup>18</sup> Though Payne makes no mention of Scott among the 'versions with which I am acquainted, that are worthy of serious notice',<sup>19</sup> Scott's edition was, according to Muhsin Jassim Ali, among the most authoritative editions available at the start of the nineteenth century: Scott published to answer 'the call for an accurate translation that would satisfy the emerging scientific spirit'.<sup>20</sup> Despite manifold similarities with the Galland edition, I refer *exclusively* to Scott's edition of the *Arabian Nights*, and not the *Nights* more generally.

The sequence of the tales has never been taken to exist in a fixed order; as Rana Kabbani has commented: 'The collection of stories commonly referred to as the 'Arabian Nights' was never a definitive text in Arabic literature as is generally

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Southey, *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey. Complete in One Volume* (London, 1876), p. 215n.

<sup>18</sup> H. S. C. Wiener, 'Byron and the East: literary sources of the "Turkish Tales"', pp. 89-129 (p. 91n). Wiener points out that Scott's six-volume set 'appears as item No. 23 in the 1816 sale catalogue of Byron's books, a copy of which may be found in the British Museum.' I shall be referring to the set currently housed in the Bodleian, shelf mark 931 f.46 (v.1) to 931 f.51 (v.6).

<sup>19</sup> John Payne, 'The Thousand and One Nights II', *The New Quarterly Magazine* (January 1879), pp. 377-401 (p. 396).

<sup>20</sup> Muhsin Jassim Ali, *Scheherazade in England: A Study of Nineteenth-Century English Criticism of the Arabian Nights* (Washington D. C., 1981), p. 74.

supposed by a Western reader'.<sup>21</sup> Without assuming an unchanging *Nights* or unchanging Orient,<sup>22</sup> and I shall be taking Scott's edition of *Nights* as existing as a whole<sup>23</sup> and argue that the manner in which the individual tales are organized is deliberate, and intensifies the didactic intention of the text. Whilst I would agree with Peter Heath's qualification that the didacticism of the *Nights* 'might not immediately appear self-evident',<sup>24</sup> recent scholarship on the *Nights* has turned away from nineteenth-century criticism, notably that of G. K. Chesterton and E. M. Forster, who argue the primary focus of Scheherazade's narrative is to ignite in the sultan (and reader) the 'wish for an everlasting story',<sup>25</sup> and that she only survives 'because she managed to keep the king wondering what would happen next.'<sup>26</sup> Heath argues that Scheherazade's 'main purpose with this strategy is not procrastination. . . On the contrary, Schahrazād is narrating tales primarily to instruct the King.'<sup>27</sup> Though Scheherazade's suspenseful *modus operandi* does not necessarily sit contrariwise to the assertion of didactic intent, as Heath appears to suggest, that her major task is the reorientation of the Sultan's perspective is beyond doubt. Fedwa Malti-Douglas similarly contends that Scheherazade's arduous task is to educate the sultan 'in the ways of a nonproblematic heterosexual relationship.'<sup>28</sup> Makdisi and Nussbaum follow twentieth-century feminist interest in the *Nights*, which suggests that Scheherazade's story primarily gives voice to culturally significant themes rather than narrative

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<sup>21</sup> Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (Bloomington, 1986), p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> See also Peter Heath's argument that the individual tales 'may also be viewed as integral parts of larger, complex literary structures' in his chapter 'Romance as Genre in *The Thousand and One Nights*', *The Arabian Nights Reader*, pp. 170-225 (p. 171).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Heath, 'Romance as Genre in *The Thousand and One Nights*', *The Arabian Nights Reader*, pp. 170-225 (p. 203).

<sup>25</sup> G. K. Chesterton, 'The Everlasting Nights', *The Spice of Life and Other Essays* (Beaconsfield, 1964), pp. 58-60 (p. 58).

<sup>26</sup> E. M. Forster, 'The Story', *Aspects of the Novel* (1927. Penguin, 2005), pp. 40-53 (p. 41).

<sup>27</sup> Peter Heath, 'Romance as Genre in *The Thousand and One Nights*', *The Arabian Nights Reader*, pp. 170-225 (p. 204).

<sup>28</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'Shahrazād Feminist', *The Arabian Nights Reader*, pp. 347-364 (p. 359).

stylistics: ‘Arab and Persian women figure centrally in the *Nights*, and one might argue that part of its modern legacy is that it gave voice to European women writers and feminist themes on a worldwide scale.’<sup>29</sup> In a consideration of the feminist legacy of the *Nights* in Byron’s Oriental poetry, one can begin to observe a productive partnership between the study of feminist themes alongside narrative stylistics.

The presentation of women in Scott’s edition of the *Nights*, culminating in the success of the heroine of the frame narrative, is comparable with a sense of female heroic development found in Byron’s *Turkish Tales*. Significantly, the presentation of women in the first three volumes of Scott’s edition of the *Nights* conforms to the limited notions of womanhood which can be observed in Byron’s own early Tales, *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* though Byron (mercifully) exhibits his Western sensibilities in his rather more cautious deployment of misogynist violence. Both of Byron’s 1813 tales are concerned with forbidden love, and accord with what Borges believes to be one of the favourite themes of the *Nights*: ‘death for love’.<sup>30</sup> In the former, the punishment faced by the heroine Leila is drowning in a sack, a punishment the author assures is ‘now less common in the East than formerly’;<sup>31</sup> in the latter the lovers, who have mistakenly believed themselves to be brother and sister throughout their childhood, attempt to elope, only to be thwarted by Zuleika’s father, the Pacha; Selim is killed in battle, and Zuleika dies on hearing the news of his death.

*The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos* appear to conform to the misogynistic setting of the *Nights*, which is infamously established by the focus on female adultery

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<sup>29</sup> Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum, ‘Introduction’, *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> *CPW* III.39. Byron comments on Leila’s murder (*The Giaour*, 1334) that ‘The circumstance to which the above story relates was not very uncommon in Turkey’ (*CPW* III.422). McGann has speculated upon Byron’s own involvement in the controversy, though admits there is ‘unfortunately little data to substantiate’ such speculation (see *CPW* III.415). For Byron’s unpublished note on the drowning of Leila see *CPW* III.423.

and violent retribution in the frame narrative. The cuckolded Sultan of the *Nights*' opening story executes his faithless wife and resolves to wed a new bride each night, and have her strangled the following morning (I.19).<sup>32</sup> The stories that form the major body of the *Nights* are told by Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter, who bravely volunteers to marry the sultan herself to prevent him strangling every marriageable maid in the land; she proceeds to deter the sultan from carrying out her own execution by telling him such engaging stories that he postpones her fate for 1001 nights. Byron's first tale presents a heroine whose fate, unlike Scheherazade's, is sealed from the opening Advertisement, though the disjointed fragmentary nature of the narrative of *The Giaour* means that the 'circumstances' surrounding the fate of Leila do not become clear until over three hundred lines into the text. Even then, her murder is censored by asterisks:

'Yet 'tis the longest voyage, I trow,

That one of' — \* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sullen it plunged, and slowly sank,

The calm wave rippled to the bank;

I watch'd it as it sank, methought

Some motion from the current caught

Bestirr'd it more,—'twas but the beam

That chequer'd o'er the living stream— (*The Giaour* I.372-379)

The use of 'trow' at the end of line 372 is haunted by the possibility of 'woe' being the completing word of the interrupted heroic couplet. The absence of gendered pronouns withholds any human identity from the sack and its contents. Objectified in

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<sup>32</sup> All citations taken from Jonathan Scott ed. *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, 6 vols. (London, 1811).

life ('The lovely toy so fiercely sought' (I.404)), it is perversely apt that Leila is treated so in death. The only adjective the fisherman attributes to the sack is sullenness, which serves only to emphasize the immaterial quality of its contents,<sup>33</sup> and made heavier by Byron's inversion of the expected opening iamb, which suggests a bodily weight.

The brutality of Leila's murder is informed by a cultural specificity: being drowned in a sack as punishment for infidelity is figured as an Eastern custom. Yet she is the only one of the Eastern heroines to die by violent means. The nature of her death is also rather less gory than her Arabian sisters. In 'The History of the Young King of the Black Isles' the adulterous queen is cut in half by her husband (I. 142) and at the start of the Story of Sinbad, where the hero is interred in a tomb with a basket containing 'the corpse of a young lady, whiter than snow, all cut in pieces.' (II.100). We later discover, in the 'Story of the Three Apples', that she has been murdered by her husband after he mistakenly believes her to have cuckolded him with a black slave (II.109).

The primary cause of death for Byron's Eastern women is a broken heart, with five out of the seven Eastern heroines suffering this fate, including Zuleika of *The Bride of Abydos*:

He was thy hope—thy joy—thy love—thine all—

And that last thought on him thou could'st not save

Sufficed to kill— (*The Bride of Abydos* II.636-638)

As is predominantly the case in the later tales, the heroine's fate is tied to that of her hero's; her grief at being unable to save his life leaves her unable to continue her own. In these lines, Byron adapts an earlier rendition of this sentiment in *The Giaour*, the

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<sup>33</sup> OED 'Sullen' 3a. <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> 28/06/10 at 13:03.

hero reacting to Leila's death as follows: 'My good, my guilt, my weal, my woe, / My hope on high—my all below.' (*The Giaour* 1182-1183). Though the remaining tragic tales conclude with brokenhearted heroines, the prototype of the grieving voice is that of the hero's.<sup>34</sup> Byron's early attention to the masculine experience of grief contrasts with the general emphasis being placed on feminine forms of mourning in the *Nights*,<sup>35</sup> and his demonstrative awareness of this tradition throughout the tales makes his initial focus on the mourning Giaour all the more remarkable.<sup>36</sup> In addition, that none of the heroines in Scott's edition are drowned in sacks,<sup>37</sup> and none die of broken hearts, suggests that whilst Byron's heroines of the tragic tales engage with a fate determined by geography, the nature of their death is more explicitly engaging with a Western tragic tradition.<sup>38</sup>

As the respective titles of the 1813 poems would indicate, the primary focus of the first is the hero, the Byronic Giaour, the second is the heroine, the not-quite-bride of Abydos.<sup>39</sup> The 1814 tales present heroes and heroines that command equal attention. *The Corsair* narrates the adventures of a pirate captain, Conrad, whose feud

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<sup>34</sup> The inversion of the two early tales is made rather more complete by the shared fate of the deceased lovers: like Leila, Selim is committed to the sea, and haunts the billows (*Bride* II.723-728).

<sup>35</sup> Scott's introductory essay (I.lxxxv) describes the chief mourner: 'She occasionally utters the most dismal shrieks, which are chorused by the wullwulleh of the other women, often hired for the occasion'; and 'The Story of Ali Baba and the 40 Robbers Destroyed by a Slave', refers to the 'lamentable cries' of women at funerals (V.150).

<sup>36</sup> See 'woman's wildest funeral wail' (*The Giaour* I.323); 'Can he not hear / The loud Wul-wulleh warn his distant ear?' (*Bride* II.626-627).

<sup>37</sup> Though there are examples of men and children being drowned, or nearly drowned, as in 'The Story of the Three Calenders, Sons of Sultans; and the Five Ladies of Bagdad' (I.320-322) and 'The Story of the Sisters Who Envied Their Younger Sister' (V.350).

<sup>38</sup> The emphasis I place on genre is contrary to Joseph Lew's statement that 'Byron helped to create an expectation based not on genre but on geography'. See "The Necessary Orientalist? *The Giaour* and Nineteenth-Century Imperialist Misogyny" in Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh, eds., *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834* (Bloomington, 1996), pp. 173-202 (p. 175).

<sup>39</sup> In its review of 'Lord Byron's *Bride of Abydos and the Corsair*', the *Antijacobin Review* (March 1814) acerbically comments 'It was reserved for the ingenuity of Lord Byron to produce a bride without a marriage.' Donald H. Reiman eds., *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, "Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets", vol. 1 of 5 (New York, 1972), p. 42. For Byron's reaction to the alleged blunder of his poem's title see *BLJ* 3.233.

with the Pacha Seyd ends in Conrad's imprisonment. Separated from Medora, the woman he loves, Conrad encounters the harem slave Gulnare. Though her love for him is unrequited, she murders the Pacha on his behalf thereby freeing them both. On his escape, Conrad learns that Medora, fearing the worst, has died of a broken heart. Gulnare's fate is unclear, though contemporary reviewers speculated that she returned as Kaled, heroine of *Lara*. *Lara's* title character is a characteristic example of the Byronic hero, 'Much to be loved and hated, sought and feared' (I.290). His only human companion is the enigmatic (and cross-dressed) Kaled, whose feminine gender is only revealed at the end of the poem at the news of Lara's death. It is in the presentation of an alternative *female* hero in *The Corsair* and *Lara* that Byron's tales find what Leask describes as a 'transgressive path' which counteracts the 'official' heroism of the *Tales*'.<sup>40</sup>

Leask rightly emphasizes the importance of the heroines, rather than the heroes of the two 1814 tales, 'for it is the women who suddenly spring to life.'<sup>41</sup> In the 1814 tales the radicalization of the heroine is far more explicit than in any of the other tales. Compare Zuleika's flight with Selim:

More free her timid bosom beat,

The maid pursued her silent guide;

And though her terror urged retreat,

How could she quit her Selim's side? (*Bride*, II.95-98)

With Kaled's steadfastness:

He turned his eye on Kaled, ever near,

And still too faithful to betray one fear;

(*Lara*, II.348-349)

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<sup>40</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East*, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East*, p. 45.

This Lara mark'd, and laid his hand on his:

It trembled not in such an hour as this;

(II.354-355)

The motivation for such devotion is unchanging: love. Yet the manner in which it manifests itself, and the actions taken by each heroine are striking in their dissimilarity. As far as one can speak convincingly of a sense of development within poems written and published within eight months of each other,<sup>42</sup> it is clear that Byron's initial attempt to try his hand on a female character in *Zuleika*<sup>43</sup> encouraged him to repeat the endeavour.

Scheherazade is an early example of the kind of heroine we encounter in Byron's later Turkish tales, possessing 'courage, wit, and penetration, infinitely above her sex. She had read much, and had so admirable a memory, that she never forgot any thing she had read. . . . Besides this, she was a perfect beauty, and all her accomplishments were crowned by solid virtue' (I.20). Notably, other than Scheherazade herself, the first three volumes of Scott's *Arabian Nights* contain few examples of radical femininity. A shift, however, occurs in the third volume. Despite opening with the expression of similar sentiments to those of the Sultan in the frame story in the 'Story of Kummir al Zummaun and the Princess of China' ('I know not whether I could prevail on myself to marry, on account of the trouble incident to a married life, and the many treacheries of women, which I have read of' (III.105)), the volume swiftly progresses to the 'Story of Noor Ad Deen and the Fair Persian', whose hero adopts an almost Wollstonecraftian rhetoric, stating 'there is but little difference between brutes and those men who keep a slave only to look at, and to gratify a

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<sup>42</sup> *The Bride* and *Lara* were published swiftly after composition, on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1813 and August 6<sup>th</sup> 1814 respectively.

<sup>43</sup> Letter "To Edward Daniel Clarke" December 15<sup>th</sup> 1813 (*BLJ* 3.199): 'I also wished to try my hand on a female character in *Zuleika* – & have endeavoured as far as ye. grossness of our masculine ideas will allow – to preserve her purity without impairing the ardour of her attachment.'

passion that we have in common with them'(III.284). The buying and selling of female slaves informs much of the narrative of the stories in the third volume; along with the Fair Persian, there is 'The Story of Prince Beder and the Princess Jehaun-Ara', which contains the following condemnation of slavery by the heroine, Gulnare of the Sea (III.383):

The body indeed may be enslaved, and under the subjection of a master, who has the power and authority in his hands; the will and never be conquered, but remains free and unconfined, depending on itself alone.

The sentiments and language are remarkably similar those expressed by Byron's Gulnare:

I felt—I feel—love dwells with—with the free.

*(The Corsair II.502)*

And:

I never loved—he bought me—somewhat high—

Since with me came a heart he could not buy.

(III.329-330)

Also comparable is 'The Story of Ali Baba and the 40 Robbers Destroyed by a Slave', where Morgiana, the slave of the title, manages to end the lives of 37 of the robbers; she begins by stabbing the leader of the gang of thieves with a poniard, saving Ali Baba's life a second time, in a manner remarkably akin to that of Byron's Gulnare. In return, Ali Baba grants her freedom and marries her to his son (V.179).

Crucially, the final tale of Scott's fifth volume, 'The Story of the Sisters Who Envied Their Younger Sister', told immediately prior to the happy conclusion of the frame, is one of female heroism. The latter half of the tale follows the adventures of the daughter of the younger sister of the title, Princess Perie-zadeh, who goes on a

quest to rescue her brother. Though she is cautioned of the danger ahead, she asserts confidence in her abilities: ‘as in all enterprises and dangers every one may use strategem’ (V.379). The ‘Heroic princess’ obtains the object of her quest – a talking bird – ‘so courageously’ that the bird swears ‘inviolable fidelity’ (V.381). She leads the way home, her male companions declaring: ‘Madam, were we ignorant of the respect due to your sex, yet after what you have / done for us there is no deference we would not willingly pay you, notwithstanding your modesty; we entreat you no longer to deprive us of the happiness of following you’ (V.386-387). Again, we are reminded of *The Corsair*, where we are told of Conrad’s men: ‘had they known / A woman’s hand secured that deed her own, / She were their queen – less scrupulous are they / Than haughty Conrad how they win their way’ (III.508-511).

The sixth volume of Scott’s *Nights*, which collects extra tales selected from the Montagu manuscript copy and translated by Scott, contains two further tales of female resourcefulness and courage. The first, ‘The Story of the Lovers of Syria; or, The Heroine’ follows the heroine of the title who is separated from her lover after being taken hostage by the master of a ship. Outwitting her captors, she takes control of the ship and its crew and sails for the scene of her kidnapping. *En route*, the heroine collects 39 ladies and 40 robbers, taking the robbers’ booty and clothing the women as men in the process (VI.250-251). Before being reunited with her lover, the convincingly cross-dressed heroine arrives in a foreign land, takes up the position of sultan and, subversively, is married to the vizier’s daughter:

From this time they lived in perfect happiness together, one exercising the authority of sultan to the satisfaction of the subject, and the other acting the part of a satisfied and obedient wife (VI.253-254)

This ‘artful yet virtuous’ (VI.255) heroine continues to reign as sultan until the arrival of her father, and her lover. She and her wife are married to the lover and live happily ever after. The storyline of ‘The Heroine’ invites comparison with *Twelfth Night*, and indeed, becomes almost an Arabic pantomime of its Shakespearean relative. Such early examples of cross-dressed heroines appropriating traditionally masculine spheres of action offer clear comparison with Byron’s own tales, *Lara* in particular.

The tales collated by Scott in the fifth and sixth volume alert us to the narrative power Scheherazade wields. The subliminal influence created by the progression of the tales should not be overlooked: as the nights pass, Scheherazade becomes more daring in her presentation of women, until they eventually become a gloss on her own position. As with Byron’s *Turkish Tales*, we can observe a marked shift in narrative tone, as well as content as we progress through Scott’s *Nights*. Scheherazade’s voice becomes more didactic at close of ‘The Wonderful Lamp’, the opening story of the fifth volume, and we begin to observe a shift in dynamics between the sultan and the story-teller – he begins to wake her himself: ‘His only thought now was to see if he could exhaust her store’ (V.46). Whilst we can observe the treatment of women as resources to be exhausted (reminiscent of Byron’s casting of the East in his letter to Moore), such straightforward chauvinism is complicated by the sultan’s recognition of Scheherazade’s tales as educational: ‘Indeed they were all diverting, and for the most part seasoned with a good moral’ (V.46). In the concluding lines of the collection, it is made clear that Scheherazade’s efforts have been a success, the Sultan declaring:

I see, lovely Scheherazade, said he, that you can never be at a loss for these little stories, which have so long diverted me. You have appeased my anger. I freely renounce the law I had imposed on myself. I restore your sex to my favourable

opinion, and will have you to be regarded as the deliverer of the many damsels I had resolved to sacrifice to my unjust resentment (V.411-412)<sup>44</sup>

Not only has she saved her own life, but by her own actions, and her subtle introduction of the merits of women and the capacity of female characters for bravery and honour (by the final volume female heroics and male cowardice come in equal measure), she convinces the sultan to suspend his ‘unhappy prejudice against the fidelity of women’, and to cease his pursuit of enacting his vengeful and ‘unjust resentment’ on less fortunate sultanesses.

Though I have argued that Byron’s heroines become more active in the later tales, it is important to emphasize that they are not empowered via didacticism. In stark contrast to Scheherazade’s appeased sultan, Gulnare’s Pacha receives her rhetorical defence of Conrad with incredulity:

Release my foe!—at whose remonstrance?—thine! . . .

I have a counsel for thy gentler ear:

I do mistrust thee, woman! and each word

Of thine stamps truth on all Suspicion heard. (III.171;177-179)

Gulnare’s voice is not devoid of power throughout the poem. On offering Conrad’s relief, she assures Conrad that: ‘A single word of mine removes that chain: / Without some aid how here could I remain’ (III.314-315). Yet Gulnare’s failed attempt at coercing Seyd through verbal means necessitates her recourse to violent ones.

Both the *Nights* and the *Tales* resist categorization. Partly such resistance is owing to their origins. As Eva Sallis has indicated, the *Nights*: ‘evolved, arguably as a response or reaction to a rigid social and spiritual structure, and satisfies a need

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<sup>44</sup> This ending is remarkably close to Galland’s conclusion. In other versions Scheherazade produces three sons (or variation on that number) and begs to be allowed to live for their sake.

similar to that which generates carnival and carnivalesque inversions in popular cultures.<sup>45</sup> She goes on to state that ‘The *Nights* does not fit comfortably into the genre of a translation and at the same time does not fit comfortably into the canon of English literature.’<sup>46</sup> We can extend such an analysis to Byron’s own *Tales*, which masquerade as Eastern tales, clothed in Oriental costume, and remain to be taken seriously in their canonicity. The various conditions surrounding the *Tales*’ conception, not least the evident vacillation of Byron’s own opinion of what they were and how they should be taken prevent a sterile reading of them as being serious socio-political critiques. Yet, as Marilyn Butler has argued, ‘In either case, not to attend to the variety of motive and of social philosophy in this generation of writers is to impose an untenable uniformity on the English Romantic poetry addressing the East, or, simply, not to hear what is being said.’<sup>47</sup> And it is variety of motive *and* content that both the *Nights* and the *Tales* teach us. As Chesterton wrote in his critique of the *Nights*: ‘The possibilities of life are not to be counted. That is the profoundly practical moral buried in the *Arabian Nights*.’<sup>48</sup> The profoundly practical literary moral of the both Byron’s *Tales* and the *Arabian Nights* is just that: the possibilities of text are not to be counted.

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<sup>45</sup> Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights*, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Eva Sallis, *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights*, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Marilyn Butler, ‘Orientalism’, *The Romantic Period. Penguin History of Literature*, vol. 5 (Harmondsworth, 1994), pp. 395-447 (p. 447).

<sup>48</sup> G. K. Chesterton, ‘The Everlasting Nights’, p. 59.