

Romantic Orientalism: Representing the East in British Romantic Oriental Tales



ENGL 02 499: Senior Seminar
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Course Description:

This course will explore how British Romantic writers depicted and engaged with the East in a variety of modes and genres—and, indeed, mixed genres and forms as a way of grappling with the “exotic” Eastern Other. Fundamentally at stake are questions of representation—and how literary production locates representation historically, socially, and culturally.

The Arabian Nights first entered the European literary tradition in 1704 (French; English 1706) and has inspired continuations, adaptations, and appropriations ever since. Over the course of the eighteenth century in England, the oriental tale developed from an Enlightenment mode to a Romantic one—in many ways revising and reimagining elements drawn from *The Arabian Nights*. The influence of this indelible touchstone was heightened by the rise of Modern Orientalism, which, according to Edward Said, began to take shape around the beginning of the Romantic period. As globalization, empire, and nationalism all grew, British writers adopted new tactics to mediate literary encounters with the East.

Below is a smattering of potential texts this course might cover; the generous list is provided to give a sense of the variety of British literary engagements with the East at this time. In fact, we might even think of the literary landscape as seemingly “colonizable” terrain; for instance, Thomas Moore was deeply jealous of Lord Byron’s copious output of oriental tales in the 1810s and feared being considered a “Byronian” and a follower, rather than a discoverer and conqueror (a problematic notion for multiple reasons). That said, Moore’s jealousy was well founded: Byron’s *Corsair*—a romping pirate tale—sold 10,000 copies on its first day of publication. Also included here: an

arabesque tale featuring Scheherazade and genies; a didactic tale that plays a ridiculously over-the-top prank on a character to teach him a lesson; a gothic tale involving a sorceress and also necrophilia; an autobiography wherein opium is declared the ultimate hero of the tale; a melodrama that staged horseback battles and an entire waterfall. And again, Byronic pirates!

Possible Course Texts:

- *The Arabian Nights* (selections)
- Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Turkish Embassy Letters*
- Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*
- Frances Sheridan, *The History of Nourjahad*
- Sir William Jones, select poetry and essays
- William Beckford, *Vathek*
- Phoebe Gibbes, *Hartly House, Calcutta*
- Elizabeth Hamilton, *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*
- *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*
- *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*
- Robert Southey, *Thalaba the Destroyer*
- Lady Morgan, Sydney Owenson, *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*
- Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*
- Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*
- Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*
- William Thomas Moncrieff, *The Cataract of the Ganges*