BYRON’S “TURKISH TALES”: AN INTRODUCTION

Peter Cochran

Sequence of composition and publication

These six poems consolidated Byron’s fame – or notoriety – throughout the world, after the publication of *Childe Harold* I and II in March 1812. *The Giaour* was started in London between September 1812 and March 1813, first published by John Murray in late March 1813, and finally completed December 1813, after having, in Byron’s words, “lengthened its rattles” (BLJ III 100) from 407 lines in the first draft to 1334 lines in the twelfth edition.

The Bride of Abydos was drafted in London in the first week of November 1813, was fair-copied by November 11th, and was first published by Murray on December 2nd 1813, almost simultaneous with the last edition of *The Giaour*.

The Corsair was drafted mostly at Six Mile Bottom, the home of Byron’s half-sister Augusta Leigh, near Newmarket. Canto I was started on December 18th 1813, and Canto II on December 22nd 1813. The fair copy was started between December 27th and 31st 1813, and final proof corrections were made on January 16th or 17th 1814; the poem was first published by Murray on February 1st 1814.

The first canto of *Lara* was started in London on May 15th 1814, and the draft of Canto 2 started June 5th of the same year, and finished on June 12th. The poem was fair-copied between June 14th and 23rd, and first published by Murray, anonymously, with Samuel Rogers’ *Jacqueline: a Tale,* shortly after August 5th 1814.

The Siege of Corinth is probably based on much earlier material. Serious work was started in late January 1815, after Byron’s marriage, and finished by November of that year; it was first published with *Parisina*, anonymously, by Murray, on February 13th 1816, just before Byron’s wife left him.

Parisina, fair-copied by Lady Byron, was finished by December 1815, and first published by Murray, anonymously, in the same volume as *The Siege of Corinth*, on February 13th 1816. Its first two sections had already been published, as *It is the hour* and *Francesca*, in *Hebrew Melodies* (various dates, 1815). As Byron writes in his own prose note to the first section:

> The lines contained in Section 1 were printed as set to music some time since; but belonged to the poem where they now appear, the greater part of which was composed prior to “Lara” and other compositions since published.

If this is true, *Parisina* is in fact the third of the Tales, its composition occurring, sandwiched between that of *The Corsair* and that of *Lara*, between December 1813 and May 1814.

The composition of both *Siege* and *Parisina* straddle the battle of Waterloo.

All six poems pre-date the break-up of Byron’s marriage. He was paid for all of them (though he wouldn’t like to acknowledge the fact) except *The Corsair,* the copyright of which he gave away to R.C.Dallas, as he had that of *Childe Harold* I and II.

The “Byronic Hero”

The Giaour gives us The Byronic Hero in action for the first time. He is sketched in *Childe Harold* I and II, but as those poems are not narratives, he does nothing – only exists, and observes. Much has been written about him; what few writers say is that he has so many facets that it’s misleading to treat him as a single archetype. The Giaour and Alp in *The Siege of Corinth*, reneging from Christianity, are different from Hugo in *Parisina*, who defies his father’s authority, but accepts, at his execution, what the priest offers. Conrad in *The Corsair* was religious once: Lara, who may be him, smiles when offered absolution. Hugo’s masculinity is far stronger than that of Conrad.

The Byronic hero is a human dead-end. He is never successful as a warrior or as a politician (see Lara's unfocussed revolt, or Conrad's foolish attack on Seyd's stronghold); he is never successful as a lover. That Hugo is successful in both roles rules him out, I think, as a Byronic Hero, just as *Parisina* is not really a "Turkish Tale" at all. The Byronic Hero is never a husband, never a father, and never a teacher (as Manfred, an intellectual variant, might have been). He bequeaths nothing to posterity, and his life ends with him. He is to be contrasted with the Shakespearean tragic hero, who has to be something potentially life-affirming, such as a father (Lear) or a witty conversationalist (Hamlet) or a great soldier (Macbeth, Coriolanus, Antony) or a lover (Romeo, Antony). If they were not such excellent people, their stories would not be tragic. The Byronic Hero is not tragic: he's just a failure, and leads on to the Superfluous Man of Russian literature – as Pushkin demonstrated, when he created the Byronically-fixated Eugene Onegin. Tatyana almost comes to terms with her love for Onegin when she reads his marginal annotations to *Childe Harold*. The Byronic Hero must *never* be witty, or be brought in contact with a critical intelligence such as Tatyana's: if he were, his tale would lose its imagined grandeur – as Byron was to demonstrate in *Beppo*, which places him in a facetious context. Medora, at the end of *The Corsair* Canto I, *is* witty at the expense of Conrad; and his reaction is to walk out on her.

In his gloom, failure, and rejection of humour The Byronic Hero aligns not with the heroes of Shakespearean tragedy but with the villains of Shakespearean comedy: Shylock, Malvolio, and Jacques. Like them, he dislikes music – see *The Giaour*, 887-8, *The Corsair*, 438, or *Lara*, 148.

I would suggest that The Byronic Hero is either a closet gay, or a poorly-adjusted bisexual – a problem that Byron would have known all about. The Giaour is just as wretched at having killed Hassan as he is at having killed Leila, and Conrad seems infatuated with the unnoticed young pirate Gonsalvo (see *The Corsair*, 577-8). Conrad's encounters with Medora are rhetorical rather than personal – rather in the style of Othello's encounters with Desdemona. He gets very emotional when he's leaving her, or when she's dead; but is unwilling to live with her constant company.

Fragmented narratives and variable voices

As *The Giaour* lengthened its rattles, its narrative became more broken, with important sections seemingly suppressed, and a variety of voices telling its story from seemingly irreconcilable perspectives. How, for example, does Hassan recapture Leila after she has eloped with the Giaour? Why, if they suspect him to be a renegade, do the monks allow him into their monastery? The way in which the reader is led into thinking either that they have been given the salient missing narrative features, only to find that they haven't, or that they've been left more frankly in the dark, has been described by Corin Throsby in a recent (unpublished) paper as a characteristic Byronic "tease," holding out to the reader the prospect of resolution while at the same time denying it to them. This is normally seen as a thing peculiar to *The Giaour*, assisted by the way Byron's inspiration came and went, and the way in which his judgement seems not to have been able to tell him when the poem was finished: but in fact the next three tales – *The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair*, and *Lara* – all have fragmentary narratives, with important details suppressed. Why has the paranoically suspicious Giaffir entrusted Selim with the Haram key? Why is Conrad so fixated with the young sailor Gonsalvo? What causes Medora's death? Surely she would wait before collapsing until certain news came of Conrad's fate, one way or the other? What is the information that Ezzelin knows about Lara? Why is Otho so ready to fight for the absent Ezzelin? Is the body dumped in the river that of Ezzelin? These show either a tantalising narrative method, or sloppy, sentimental story-telling, depending on how charitable you feel, and whether or not you think the method justifies itself in terms of tensions and resolutions. Only when we arrive at the last two, *Parisina* and *The Siege of Corinth*, do we find narratives with more conventional developments, middles, and ends. And there are "teases" a-plenty in the ottava rima poems.

The "Turkish Tales" and Piracy

Pirates have rarely been happy, and never fastidious about ethics (despite Byron's late note to *The Corsair*, about Jean Lafitte). On December 4th 1810 Byron's friend John Cam Hobhouse is worried about his relationship with his father, and is reading a book about pirates:

> Melancholy indeed at having no letter from Pater. Read at Uphams a deal of the lives of the Pyrates – full of the most strange instances of depravity – one of them going to be hanged, the executioner who was not used to it tied his hands behind – upon which the fellow observed – "Well, I have seen many a man hung but never in this way before." They used to have mock trials – once a fellow personating the judge, with a pipe in his mouth, summ'd up on a prisoner in these words – "Gentlemen of the Jury, there are three reasons for hanging this prisoner: because it would be a shame if I were to sit here and nobody be hanged, secondly because he has a hanging look – thirdly, because I am hungry, and when the judge's dinner is ready hanging cuts short the matter and prevents it from the cooling." I could not help laughing heartily at this, though I knew that upon the intelligence I should receive this night depended whether I should go hang …

In his Tales, Byron wants us to believe otherwise. His two piratical chiefs – Selim in *The Bride of Abydos* and Conrad in *The Corsair* – would have piracy to be an ordered, hierarchical world, offering, in its paradoxically unfettered freedom to roam, an alternative to social conformity (though Byron makes this an Islamic conformity in each case). There's no room for gallows humour in Byron's piracy – and women must be well-treated, for many pirates are themselves husbands (*The Corsair*, 808)! When offered the opportunity to be saved from impalement – not a good way to die – Conrad, the fearsome pirate chief, has to be argued into it, for he accepts the sentence of his enemy as just, and would never countenance covert action – treachery – homicide – as a way of getting himself off the hook, or, in his case, the stake (*The Corsair*, 1537-8).

Byron's pirates are foolish, sentimental constructs, designed for a middle-class market which liked to be excited but not too shocked.

"Orientalism" and the Tales

Sir William Jones[1] was one of the greatest of Oriental scholars, and, before going to the Mediterranean, Byron learned much from his work. However, he gets short shrift from Edward Said, who describes him (*Orientalism* p. 77) as having "closed large vistas down, codifying, tabulating, comparing." "Persian Jones," who when at Harrow wore Persian garb, spoke and read twenty-eight of the seventy-two supposed languages of post-Babel civilisation. He was concerned with imaginative authenticity and exactitude in his work, providing both literal and stanzaically-exact translations of his parallel texts – though, being blissfully married, unlike Byron, he did "silently heterosexualise" much of what he found. He enabled his readers to "assimilate the Asiatic," and his work is an important subtext for Byron's, whose concern is the radically un-Saidian one of "blurring the Eurocentric binarism of self and other," to see, as did Lady Mary Wortley Montague, "English self in Asian otherness," and to employ, what Said has no time for at all, "a comic reflexivity and relativity" reflecting ironically on both East *and* West. Not for him the proselytisings of the loathed Southey, who, commenting on the "dull tautology" of the Koran, wrote his interminable epics *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *The Curse of Kehama* with a view to providing the allegedly savage cultures of Islam and Hinduism with the epics they were, he asserted, unable to provide for themselves.

Part of the difficulty which Said shares with many when trying to read Byron's Orientalism is that he can draw no distinction between the "Orientalism" of Byron, and the taste for "Exoticism" which was all most of his reading public was able to offer in the way of response. For such readers, brought up on the *1,001 Nights*, all eastern carpets were flying carpets – items of the exotic Orient to be possessed. All eastern costumes were imagined as

---

1: Some of the ideas in this section are borrowed from Naji B. Oueijan and Michael Franklin.

Biblical costumes; the presence of many Christian communities in the Near East was ignored as an embarrassment. Such Exoticism implies the superiority of the Occident over the Orient, an Orient which, in the best Saidian manner, one might own and penetrate, and praise without knowing. The Exoticist, unlike the Orientalist, is self-centred – he does not participate. Byron is not above pandering to this corrupt taste in his readership, eroticising the Oriental Other with a view perhaps to "puffing out his pocket" (whatever that might imply) but, in an unExotic way, he *blushes* while doing so. He *has* participated. He has had the guts to be different – it was his blinkered contemporary and his subsequent Victorian readership who could not read him. His occidental heroes and oriental heroines make love with a natural eagerness which other oriental writers eschew – compare Juan and Haidee, published in mid-1819, with the frigid Ivanhoe and Rebecca of Sir Walter Scott, published later in 1819, by way of corrective Christian riposte. The Oriental maiden must be admired from a distance only: get into bed with her, warns Scott, and your European (i.e. British) self is disfigured and contaminated.

Byron was an original and subversive writer, writing in times which were conservative and would soon become more so. The nineteenth century experienced difficulty in reading him (see quotation from Berlioz at the end of this introduction).

The Tales and *Vathek*

William Beckford's brilliant novel was first published in French in 1786, with copious notes by Samuel Henley. Byron loved it. To line 598 of *The Siege of Corinth* he appends a note:

> I have been told that the idea expressed in this and the five following lines has been admired by those whose approbation is valuable. I am glad of it: but it is not original – at least not mine; it may be found much better expressed in pages 182-184 of the English version of "Vathek" (I forget the precise page of the French), a work to which I have before referred; and never recur to, or read, without a renewal of gratification.

Siege was published early in 1816, some time after the other four Turkish Tales. *Vathek* was, by coinicidence, reprinted later in the year, with its notes pruned. Byron's admission of regard came late, and was not full enough as a revelation of his indebtedness: for Byron, who elsewhere expressed his pride at always having been "on the spot,"[2] took so many of his oriental details from this famous book, with which he had been familiar since well before his first eastern journey, that one can only blink.

He need only have had *Vathek* and its notes to consult in order to understand the following concepts and vocabulary: houris (*Giaour* 486, *Bride* 147); genii (*Giaour* 385); the Nightingale and the Rose (*Giaour* 22 and n); the word "Giaour" itself; the order of Moslem prayers (*Siege* 22); Istakhar (*Bride* 358 and n); derviches (*Giaour* 340, *Corsair* 670); peris (*Bride* 567); butterflies of Kashmeer (*Giaour* 385); Mejnoun and Leila (*Bride* 72 and n); gouls (*Giaour* 784); the carbuncle of Giamschid (*Giaour* 479); clapping of hands (*Bride* 232 and n); bread and salt (*Giaour* 343 and n); Azrael (*Bride* 233 and n); Monkir (*Giaour* 748); Al-Sirat, the bridge to paradise (*Giaour* 483); afrits (*Giaour* 784); and Eblis (*Giaour* 750 and n).

An excellent example of the style of his borrowing may be seen at his note to "Monkir" at *The Giaour*, 748. Here's Henley's note to *Vathek*, first edition (1786), p.141:

> Monker and Nakir] These are two black angels of a tremendous appearance, who examine the departed on the subject of his faith: by whom, if he give not a satisfactory account, he is sure to be cudgelled with maces of red-hot iron, and tormented more variously than words can describe.[3]

Here's what Byron makes of it:

2: See Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place* (Palgrave 2003).

3: William Beckford, *Vathek*, (1786), p.313; ed. Lonsdale (Oxford 1986), p.151 / 79n2.

> Monkir and Nekir are the inquisitors of the dead, before whom the corpse undergoes a slight noviciate and preparatory training for damnation. If the answers are none of the clearest, he is hauled up with a scythe and thumped down with a red hot mace till properly seasoned, with a variety of subsidiary probations. The office of these angels is no sinecure; there are but two; and the number of orthodox deceased being in a small proportion to the remainder, their hands are always full.[4]

Byron mixes up the names of the angels (as if defying pedants to care), but otherwise follows Beckford / Henley closely, adding irony. His joke anticipates the one at stanza 3 of *The Vision of Judgement*.

This indebtedness extends into *Don Juan*: lamb and pistachios (III, 62, 2); the sacred camel (VI, 102, 8); Kaf (VI, 86, 8); and the use of dwarves and mutes (V, stanzas 87-9) are all to be found in *Vathek*.

On this website, *Vathek* is cited first by a page-reference to the first edition, of 1786, and then by one to Roger Lonsdale's edition for the Oxford World's Classics, of 1983. The latter is subdivided into the page where the note is, and then the page to which the note refers.

The Heroines of the "Turkish Tales"

The heroines of the Tales trespass beyond the conventional bounds of femininity at their peril. When they assert themselves, as do Medora, Francesca, and Gulnare (even though the first two assert themselves in womanly, becoming ways), it is either from the vantage point of being dead (Francesca) at the risk of being ignored and abandoned (Medora) or at the risk of being shunned as a horrid object (Gulnare – who, if we take *Lara* to be the sequel to *The Corsair*, has to change sexual identity and go *en travestie* by way of atonement).

In *The Giaour*, Leila has hardly any identity, and indeed does not actually appear, except to be drowned; like Parisina, she is first given a sexual presence, and is then killed.

The "Turkish Tales" and Islam

In traditional European epics and romances, written first with the Crusades as background and then with the Turkish threat hovering around them, Islam was the enemy. A Moslem warrior might be honoured for his courage, but he must be defeated, or converted. The Islamic viewpoint could not be entertained. The only dialectic possible was a military one, and Christians had to win.

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

> Arabia, Mahomet, whose Koran contains most sublime poetical passages far surpassing European Poetry[5]

This may be teenage posture. In a letter to Murray of December 1814[6] he asks if it is Mecca or Medina that contains the "*holy* sepulchre"; and laments that, as "a good Mussulman," he doesn't know. His facetiousness may be crafted for the innocent publisher; since Byron had no respect for canting Anglican Christianity, and was a dabbler in both neo-Platonism and in Zoroastrianism, with which he eventually became disillusioned, we have no reason to think he held Islam in any regard in terms of his own salvation.

It was Byron's habit to portray himself (particularly to his naïve wife) as a victim of predestination. He fooled her into thinking that he had, when in the East, almost become a Moslem.[7] Such a habit of self-dramatisation would have indeed made Islam a useful backcloth for him; for, as George Sale writes,

---

4: *The Giaour*, B.'s note to 748.
5: CMP 1.
6: BLJ III 191.
7: See Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife* (Macdonald 1962), pp.270-1.

> The sixth great point of faith … is GOD's absolute decree, and predestination both of good and evil. For the orthodox doctrine is, that whatever hath or shall come to pass in this world, whether it be good, or whether it be bad, proceedeth entirely from the divine will, and is irrevocably fixed and recorded from all eternity in the *preserv'd table*; GOD having secretly predetermined not only the adverse and prosperous fortune of every person in this world, in the most minute particulars, but also his faith or fidelity, his obedience or disobedience, and consequently his everlasting happiness or misery after death; which fate or predestination it is not possible, by any foresight or wisdom, to avoid.[8]

However, Byron's positive attitude to the religion would have been fostered and reinforced by *Vathek*, in which the sins of the protagonist are measured against Islamic, not Christian, moral standards.

The Giaour, alone among the 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 all the details 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.[9]

An author who denied any value to Eastern poetry, religion, or ethics, was Byron's enemy Robert 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 his Islamic epic, *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) 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.[10]

Byron had read *Thalaba* by 1807[11] when he wrote out his own juvenile reading list. In a later note by Southey to *Thalaba* Book 1, we read

> 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.[12]

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*, 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:

8: George Sale, *Koran, commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed, Preliminary Discourse* (1764), p.103.
9: *The Giaour*, Byron's note to 35.
10: *Thalaba* Book 1, n: Works, 1850, p. 214.
11: See letter to Elizabeth Pigot, BLJ I 127.
12: *Thalaba* Book 1, n: Works, 1850, p. 215.

> Ferdausi, author of the Shah Nameh the Persian Iliad, Sadi, and Hafiz, the immortal Hafiz the oriental Anacreon ...[13]

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.

Having said that, we have to admit that Byron's knowledge of Islam seems a bit cursory. In his note to *Giaour* 734, he misses out several words from the end of the muezzin's call, and confuses its end phrase with its opening. There is no midnight prayer in Islam (*Siege*, 221-2). The Koran does not blame Eve for the Fall of Man (*Bride*, 158-61).

Byron discovers Catholicism

The nameless Giaour rejects Christianity – a fact to which Byron gave his assent in his note to line 1207 of *The Giaour*, but to which two noted Catholic Byronists objected. Amedée Pichot, who translated all of Byron into French, soft-pedalled the Giaour's derisive attitude to the sacraments, to make the poem more palatable to a continental readership; and Adam Mickiewicz, who translated *The Giaour* into Polish so well that his version is now considered a Polish poem – it was quoted at the Gdansk shipyard gates in 1980 – changed the ending, so that his protagonist has what neither Byron's Giaour, Byron's Lara, nor Byron's Manfred have – a Christian conscience.

Why the Giaour, having no faith and holding those who have in contempt, chooses a monastery in which to take refuge, is mysterious – why not live in a cave, or a hotel suite (he has the money) and wander the streets like the Ancient Mariner, looking for well-disposed people to hypnotize? The suspicion is that Byron enjoyed shocking people foolish enough, in his eyes, to possess faith; so the Giaour has to confess to a priest – but not to repent. He is shriven at the last (*Giaour*, 1332); but whether he is sensible to the priest's gesture in his dying moments is not clear.

Conrad and Selim never come into contact with Christianity (though Conrad had been religious once: see *The Corsair*, 1082); Lara smiles at the priest who would shrive him (*Lara*, 1126); Alp in *The Siege of Corinth* has rejected the church, and rejects it still, even when Francesca's ghost – in the poem's most moving section – begs him to change his mind. In his progress since *The Giaour*, Byron seems to be changing his perspective on Christian faith, so that we are not surprised when Hugo in *Parisina* (written before *Lara*) accepts his doom as a good sinner ought.

Do the "Turkish Tales" have a Whig subtext?

In *The Bride*, the loquacious Selim is a rebel against the (Islamic) establishment; but even then, he carefully denies any involvement with aspirants for political equality (see *The Bride*, 867-7); and if the establishment had not killed his father and denied his manhood, he'd be happy – we assume – to support it. At *The Corsair*, 1453-4, Conrad even expresses his understanding, and implicit approval, of the death sentence "the hated tyrant" Seyd has passed upon him; Gulnare's act in murdering her master and freeing the man she loves is presented, through Conrad's eyes, as a monstrous thing – Gulnare is polluted, unwomanly, like Lady Macbeth! We *almost* understand that Conrad would rather have been impaled than have been rescued by her at the cost of his enemy's life. Never was escapee in less haste.

Lara's revolt – mistimed and mismanaged, like Conrad's attack on Seyd's citadel – is motivated by "Religion – freedom – vengeance – what you will" (*Lara*, 867); Byron is not concerned to diagnose its causes – it can't in historical terms be a revolt against feudalism, for there never was any such thing in Spain. Byron remains neutral about its wisdom and even about its justification. It gives him occasion for a misanthropical, anti-militarist sneer (*Lara*, 869-70).

13: CMP 1. The influence on him of the translations of Sir William Jones is clear here: see BLJ III 164.

To be a Whig was not to be a radical. If we suspect that there may be a "Whig subtext" behind the Tales, it's worth reminding ourselves that, apart from the question of Catholic emancipation and apart from a leaning towards a mild reformism in parliamentary terms, the Whigs were just as welded to the status quo as the Tories.

Triangulation in the Tales

Each of the tales derives its conflict from a triangular relationship; in four of the six poems the triangulation is between an older man and two younger people of opposite sexes. In two cases – *Bride* and *Siege* – the older man is the father of the woman. Only The *Giaour* makes all three characters of the same generation, and only in *Lara* is such strict triangulation absent – one reason, perhaps, for *Lara*'s failure as a coherent narrative. When there is an older man, he in most cases succeeds in destroying the happiness of the younger people, except in *The Corsair*, where the woman murders him.

The Tales in the context of Byron's work

The gloomy heroes of the poems are – with the exception of Hugo – developments of the "self-exiled" Harold, and the backgrounds of *The Giaour*, *The Bride*, *The Corsair*, and *The Siege*, are all studied with the same fascination for Aegean and Turkish detail shown in *Childe Harold's* second canto.

Beppo, Byron's first comic masterpiece, is a Turkish tale turned, not with utter facetiousness, inside-out. It eschews catastrophe for bathos, and blood-soaked termination for mundane reconciliation. Beppo, like Alp "A renegado of indifferent fame," returns home to Venice, where, helped by a small present to the church, he has himself re-baptised, and is not only reunited with his wife, but becomes "often friends" with her Cavalier Servente. It's as if The Giaour, Leila, and Hassan should, at the end of the poem, get together over a cup of coffee.

The Tales also look forward to Byron's greatest poem, *Don Juan*, which re-examines their material, again in a serio-comic perspective. In its second canto, pirates again dominate. The Christian-Moslem conflict is again important, not only in Juan's loves for the part-Moorish Julia, the half-Moorish Haidee, and the odalisque Dudù, but in the war cantos (VI, VII and VIII) in which a supposedly Christian nation (Russia) batters down the Islamic town of Ismael. Here Juan, the Catholic hero, comports himself well; but Islamic heroism is also depicted, in the deaths of the old Tartar Khan and his sons.

Digression (Byron's tendency to which is looked at with embarrassment at *The Corsair*, 1222) dominates in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, as it does not in the Tales.

Gulnare is the archetype for the heroines of *Don Juan*. And it is the aggressive Gulnare as she is before the murder of Seyd, not the terrified Gulnare, almost ill with the effect that deed has had on the man for whom she did it, still less the self-obliterating Kaled, as Gulnare has become in *Lara*. The strange passivity which we see in Conrad, as Gulnare persuades him to be rescued, is transmuted into the passivity of Juan before the predatory instincts of heroine after heroine. And, although we don't know, for Byron died before the poem got that far, it's possible that the most chaste of all *Don Juan's* females – Aurora Raby – might have become the most predatory.

Triangulation (see previous section) is common in *Don Juan*, always with the hero as one point of the triangle. In Canto I it is between Juan, Julia, and her husband Alfonso; in Cantos II to IV it is between Juan, Haidee, and her father Lambro. In Cantos V and V it is between Juan, Gulbeyaz, and her husband the Sultan; only in the Russian Cantos is the pattern absent – there can be no third party when Catherine the Great is the lady in the case. In the English cantos a previously unprecedented four-point relationship is beginning to develop – between Juan, Adeline, Fizt-Fulke, and Aurora Raby – but, again, Byron dies before we can see what would have become of such a departure.

Reputation and influence

Nothing like the "Turkish Tales" had ever been seen. Their convincing Oriental colours, the wildness of their characters, and the violent events portrayed – or supposedly portrayed – in their plots, made them a phenomenon. As soon as the cessation of war in 1815 permitted, they were translated into French; and within ten years, most were available either in that *lingua franca*, in continental English-language editions, or in other languages. Between them, they and Scott's Waverley Novels transformed European literature, painting, and music. Never before or since had or has English literature been so influential with such speed. Shakespeare took much longer to percolate through. Berlioz was an admirer of both Shakespeare and Byron, and, in his Memoirs, he records the following, describing his time in Rome in the early 1830s:

> Not all the great relics of classical Rome, which alone give glamour to the modern city, could compensate me for what I was missing. Nor is that so surprising. The objects one has constantly before one's eyes soon become so familiar that eventually they cease to arouse any but the most commonplace ideas and impressions. I must however except the Colosseum, which day or night I never looked on unmoved. St Peter's too always thrilled me. It is so vast, so nobly beautiful, so serene and majestic. I liked spending the day there when the summer's heat became unbearable. I would take a volume of Byron and, settling myself comfortably in a confessional, enjoy the cool air of the cathedral; and in a religious silence, unbroken by any sound but the murmur of two fountains in the square outside, wafting in as the wind stirred momentarily, would sit there absorbed in that burning verse. I followed the Corsair across the sea on his audacious journeys. I adored the extraordinary nature of the man, at once ruthless and of extreme tenderness, generous-hearted and without pity, a strange amalgam of feelings seemingly opposed: love of a woman, hatred of his kind.
>
> Occasionally, laying down the book to meditate, I let my gaze wander round. Attracted by the light, my eyes would look upwards to Michelangelo's glorious dome and my thoughts accomplish an abrupt transformation. From roaring pirates and bloody execution I passed in an instant to the music of the spheres, the quiring seraphim, goodness and serenity, and the infinite peace of heaven. Then, coming down to earth a little, I fancied some palpable imprint of the poet might still linger in the place. He must have stood there, I thought, and looked at those figures of Canova's. His feet trod this marble, his hands explored that bronze. He breathed this air, his words vibrated in this stillness – words, perhaps, of tenderness and love. Of course, for he must have come here with his friend the Countess Guiccioli – rare and admirable woman, who understood him with such complete understanding, by whom he was so profoundly loved. Yes, loved, a poet, free, rich – he was all these things. And in the silence of the confessional I ground my teeth till the damned must have heard and trembled.[14]

Byron never went to Rome with Guiccioli – but it makes no difference, so powerful is Berlioz's reading, both of the myth of Byron's life and of the myth which then enhaloed Byron's poetry, even as one read it. Byron and *The Corsair*, like the rest of the "Turkish Tales," encountered a gap in people's imaginations, and they filled the gap with the man and the poem, willy-nilly.

Two books which I have found very useful when annotating the Tales are Abdur Raheem Kidwai's *Orientalism in Lord Byron's Turkish Tales,* (Mellen University Press 1995); and Naji B Oueijan's *A Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron's Oriental Tales*, (Peter Lang, New York. 1999). I am also very grateful to Firas O. Shaer for his advice on Islam.

The illustrations – which convey very well the sensational and sentimental way in which the Tales were read – are reproduced by kind permission of Jeffrey Vail from his website, http://people.bu.edu/jwvail/byron_illustrations.html

---

14: *A Life of Love and Music, The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, 1803-1865, tr. and ed. David Cairns, Folio Society 1987, pp. 119-20.