

Thomas Moore's Orientalism
Paper by Allan Gregory
Newstead Abbey and Irish Byron Societies

Francis Jeffrey, in the Edinburgh Review of November, 1817, was lavish in his praise for Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*:-

“There is a great deal of our recent poetry derived from the East: But this is the finest orientalism we have had yet... “ the beauteous forms, the dazzling splendours, the breathing odours of the East, seem at last to have found a kindred poet in that Green Isle of the West... It is amazing, indeed, how much at home Mr. Moore seems to be in India, Persia, and Arabia; and how purely and strictly Asiatic all the colouring and imagery of his book appears.”

This was a glowing review from the so-called “self-constituted judge of poesy” and in sharp contrast to the same editor’s review in July, 1806, of Moore’s *Epistles, Odes and Other Poems*, when the entire publication was given over to a rising torrent of invective. Longman’s paid Moore the enormous sum of £3,000 for *Lalla Rookh*. Having read Jeffrey’s review, one could be forgiven for thinking that Moore, in his extensive research, also discovered the ubiquitous oriental expectation of “baksheesh”.

Academically, Moore was no stranger to the Orient. In his final year at Trinity College, Dublin, he worked on his translations from the Greek of the *Odes of Anacreon* and was encouraged by the Provost to complete the task. These were published in 1800, with a dedication to His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent.

The first edition of *Irish Melodies* was published in April 1808 in two volumes. Their success was immediate, and despite the underlying intimations of Irish nationalism, the melodies were whistled and sung across the British Isles and beyond. “Melody Moore” had arrived.

But Moore was not content to rest on his laurels and be remembered only for his lyrics. Determined to jump on the oriental band-wagon, he wrote to Mary Godfrey on the 11th September, 1811:

*I shall now take to my poem and do something, I hope, that will place me above the vulgar herd both of wordlings and critics; but you shall hear from me again, when I get among the maids of Cashmere, the sparkling springs of Rochabad, and the fragrant banquets of the Peris.*¹

The work he was referring to, of course, was *Lalla Rookh*. Moore had the reputation of being a slow, fastidious writer; and in this case he was nervously aware he was not writing out of experience of Eastern manners or scenery, but from an idea of the Orient delved out of countless books; an exercise that would prove fatal to the poem’s vitality and realism. The first draft shows he began writing on November 11th, 1811.

On the 28th of August, 1813, three months after Byron’s success with his first oriental poem, *The Giaur*, he encouraged Moore to proceed with his plans for a work in similar mode.

Stick to the East;-the oracle, {Madame de} Stael, told me it was the only poetical policy. The North, South and West, have all been exhausted; but from the East we have nothing but Southey's unsaleables ...The little I have done in that way is merely a "voice in the wilderness" for you; and, if it has had any success, that also will prove that the public are orientalizing, and pave the path for you. {BLJ 3:101 }

Moore knew that his oriental poem, when it appeared, would inevitably be compared to Byron's. Byron, "the oriental poet", became a palpable presence to Moore during the years up to 1817, when *Lalla Rookh* would finally appear in print. Byron published *The Bride of Abydos*, which he wrote in one week, and the *Corsair*, which he wrote in ten days. With each new appearance of Byron's oriental tales, Moore felt more dejected and fearful for the prospects of his own poem. Amazed at Byron's rapidity of composition and frustrated by his own lack of progress, he found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the work in hand. Byron was conscious of this and so dedicated the *Corsair* to his friend:

...I trust truly that you are engaged in the composition of a poem whose scene will be laid in the East; none can do those scenes so much justice. The wrongs of your own country, the magnificent and fiery spirit of her sons, the beauty and feeling of her daughters, may there be found; ... Your imagination will create a warmer sun, and less clouded sky; but wildness, tenderness and originality, are part of your national claim of oriental descent, to which you have already thus far proved your title more clearly than the most zealous of your country's antiquarians.

There is no doubt this dedication encouraged Moore greatly; he was ashamedly self-conscious of his lack of personal experience in Eastern culture; Byron made him consider his own cultural background and how the religious and political problems facing his own countrymen could be incorporated, into his bookish orientalism.

Lalla Rookh, an Oriental Romance was finally published on the 22nd May 1817, six years after it was begun. In its final form it consisted of a prose narrative linking four poems: *The Veiled prophet of Khorassan*, *Paradise and the Peri*, *The Fire-worshippers*, and *The Light of the Haram*. The linking narrative tells of the journey from Delhi to Cashmere of Lalla Rookh, daughter of the Emperor of Bucharria, who is being taken in ceremonial procession to marry the newly ascended young emperor of Persia, whom she has never seen. On the way, she and her train are diverted by four verse tales told by Feramorz, a young Cashmere poet, with whom she falls in love and who turns out to be her intended husband. The "critical and fastidious" eunuch Fadladeen, chamberlain of the harem, also accompanies Lalla Rookh and, since he is ignorant of Feramorz's true identity, severely criticizes each of Feramorz' tales in the style of the afore-mentioned Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review*. This was Moore's way of anticipating and simultaneously dismissing future criticism of *Lalla Rookh*.

The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan and *The Fire-worshippers* are protracted, bloody and tragic poems and are closest to Byronic mode in subject, tone and versification. Both poems have violent revolution as their main theme and both are, at least partly, intended

as political allegories. *The Veiled Prophet* concerns itself with the French Revolution while *The Fire-worshippers* is based on the struggles of Ireland against British Colonialism, especially with regard to the unsuccessful Irish uprising of 1798, and its disastrous aftermath. Both poems exhibit how Moore is able to use Islamic material to define and express his views. The text is littered with copious notes, explanations and extracts from numerous works as diverse as D'Herbolet, Gibbon, Knolle's History of the Turks, The Translations of Sir William Jones, Pitt's Account of the Mohometans, Sale's Koran, the list goes on and on, indicating the extent of Moore's exhaustive research.

The "veiled prophet" of the title is Hakim Ibn Hisham, known in Islamic history by the name of "Al Mokanna" of Khorassan, from a veil he wore {mokanna in Arabic meaning "veiled"}. This veil, which masks his hideous repulsiveness, is required to protect his subjects from the dazzling brilliance of his countenance. He represents for Moore the power of despotism which in Mokanna's case depends on systematic mystification for its effects. Like all despots, he possesses an air of supreme authority. This is how Moore presents him at the beginning of the poem:-

There on that throne, to which the blind belief
Of millions rais'd him, sat the Prophet-Chief,
The Great MOKANNA. O'er his features hung
The Veil, the Silver Veil, which he had flung
In mercy there, to hide from mortal sight
His dazzling brow, till man could bear its light.
[p 19]³

But, as the poem develops, this dramatic portrait of Mokanna is revealed by Moore as merely a disguise hiding a monstrous reality:

Upon that mocking Fiend, whose Veil, now rais'd,
Show'd them, as in death's agony they gazed,
Not the long promis'd light, the brow, whose beaming
Was to come forth, all conquering, all redeeming,
But features horribler than Hell e'er trac'd
On its own brood; - no Demon of the Waste,
No church-yard Ghole, caught lingering in the light
Of the blest sun, e'er blasted human sight
With lineaments so foul, so fierce as those
The Impostor now, in grinning mockery, shows...
[p133]

Mokanna's character, as interpreted in his chilling and ferocious speeches about the folly of mankind is akin to the cynicism and misanthropy of a Byron antihero. He mirrors Milton's Satan, as, although venomous, he is portrayed as audacious, defiant and supreme exploiter of the evils of humanity. Mohammad Sharafudden in *Islam and Romantic Orientalism* notes that Moore's focus on Mokanna is to undertake "a multi-level exploration of the nature and origin of his tyranny", and that in this tale Moore attempts to put the emphasis on the tyrant, whereas, in *The Fireworshippers*, the emphasis is on

the tyrannized. While many commentators, including Sharafudden, have insisted that Mokanna represents the figure of Napoleon, this interpretation is at best ambiguous, given that Moore, like Byron, was an ardent admirer of Napoleon. Moore's continuing admiration for Bonaparte overflowed into his *Fudge Family in Paris* which he published in 1818, the year after Lalla Rookh. Jeffrey Vail, however, in *The Literary Relationship of Lord Byron and Thomas Moore* suggests that: "Mokanna's crusade certainly represents an incarnation of the revolutionary French cause, but Mokanna himself is fundamentally motivated by hatred for mankind", a form of evil that Moore would no more attribute to Napoleon than would Byron. Mokanna, according to Vail, "is more accurately seen as a personification of the most radical form of uprooting, demagogic Jacobinism, beautiful in theory but secretly animated by greed, lust, and the desire for vengeance." [p121]⁴ Greed, lust, the desire for vengeance-somehow these words and phrases are so "out-of-character" with Moore, that one could be reading Milton, Blake or indeed Byron himself.

The story of *The Veiled Prophet* is simple. Mokanna's success in his rebellion against the Islamic state of the Calif Al Mahdi results in a following which includes many young people who are attracted by his slogan "Freedom for the World". Azim, a Muslim officer, together with his beloved Zelica, join Mokanna's revolution only to discover that Mokanna has been using his rebellion to fortify a perverted lust for power and domination. The innocently, pious Zelica, having been appointed "Priestess of the Faith", has signed a contract to become Mokanna's bride in hope of a place in paradise. Azim is unable to convince her to flee with him from Mokanna's influence. In despair, he joins the army of the Calif Al Mahdi in an effort to overthrow Mokanna. At the end of a fierce battle, the defeated Mokanna flees to his palace in Neksheb, where he jumps into a bath of liquid fire. Azim breaks into the palace where he is met by a figure wearing Mokanna's veil. The figure throws itself onto his lance, and reveals itself to be his beloved Zelica. Azim spends the rest of his life in prayer at Zelica's grave where eventually he is blessed by a vision in which angels tell him God has forgiven her.

Moore's acutely imaginative commitment to his orientalism results in a story full of ambiguities. His interest in oriental revolt and tyranny for its own sake safeguards him from European analogues such as the Napoleonic conquests and the French Revolution. Sharafudden suggests that these ambiguities allowed Moore to "define a nuanced and subtle judgement, relatively free from the political prejudices of his readers or the political pressure of recent events".⁵ However, the influences on Moore are many and varied. Voltaire, for example, can be detected here. Particularly the Voltaire of the play *Mohomet*, where he uses the character of the Muslim Prophet to satirize religious fanaticism as a form of tyranny, showing how the emotional devotion of the Prophet's followers could be misused for personal despotism. If Voltaire's Mahomet was a religious imposter, Moore goes further in portraying Mokanna in a double role- as false prophet and political dictator; the first role representing the religious and emotional side of tyranny and the second, the political and materialistic side. In both cases, the figures of Napoleon and George III come to mind, the latter being considered a tyrant to Ireland in his repression of Moore's countrymen, and particularly his stance on Catholic Emancipation. This is Moore's link between political and religious despotism.

Certain instances, here, mirror moments from Byron's tales. For example, Azim's reunion with his beloved begins with a mournful four-quatrain song sung by

Zelica; in Byron's *Corsair* Medora sings a similarly sad four-quatrain song at the beginning of her reunion with Conrad.

Zelica's grief over the loss of Azim and over her own sexual degradation drives her to a state of Ophelia-like insanity similar to that of the heroine in *Parsina*, who goes mad because of her incest and the reproach of her lover Hugo.

Moore's poem finishes with a coda in which the aged Azim is praying for the rest of his life over Zelica's grave; similarly, *The Giaur* concludes with its repentant hero spending the rest of his days pining over the dead Leila.

In the *Veiled Prophet of Khorassan* Moore explores the nature and origin of Mokanna's tyranny. In *The Fireworshippers*, the tyrant conqueror is scarcely mentioned directly; the force of his influence being portrayed on the reaction of the people he persecutes. In other words, the *Veiled Prophet* deals with the causes while *The Fireworshippers* deals with the effects. The story of *The Fireworshippers* is set in Persia, or Iran, in the seventh century, when that country was overwhelmed by the Arabs. Iran is ruthlessly dominated by the Emir Al Hassan, who has a beautiful daughter named Hinda. The Iranian resistance is led by a passionately idealistic young man called Hafed. While on a mission to assassinate the Muslim Emir, Hafed encounters Hinda and they fall in love, their love surviving the disclosure of each other's identity. Hafed's mountain retreat is betrayed to the Arabs by a treacherous member of the Persian guerillas; the Emir, in preparation for a final onslaught on the mountain retreat, sends Hinda back to Arabia by sea. Her ship is captured by Hafed, who takes her to his fortress, where she warns him of the impending attack and pleads for him to abandon his mission of madness and flee with her to safety. Hafed refuses, sending her back to her homeland so that he might seek martyrdom in a final battle for freedom. When Hafed's band is overwhelmed and massacred, he immolates himself on a funeral pyre, while Hinda, witnessing his death from her ship, in turn, casts herself into the sea.

Thus, Al Hassan is the all-conquering, quintessential political and military colonialist. His actions produce a dark, sinister form of tyranny in which an entire nation is condemned to suffering and degradation. Moore's advocacy of the rights of the Persians against the colonizing Moslems is an allegorical defense of the Irish Catholics against the colonizing English. As Jeffrey Vail points out "If Byron had good reasons for writing oriental tales that problematized colonialism, Moore had still better: Moore was an actual member of a people who had been colonized by the British, and whose religion had been proclaimed by the state to be barbaric and fraudulent. There are no Christians in Moore's two Byronian tales, but by strong and unmistakable implication, establishment Christianity, the state power it upholds, and the colonizing ideology it legitimizes are all criticized and finally condemned."

Moore had befriended Robert Emmett at Trinity College, Dublin, and refused to collaborate in an enquiry which resulted in Emmett being expelled on suspicion of subversive activities. Following the United Irishmen's unsuccessful insurrection of 1798, Emmett went to France hoping to gain French assistance for a plan which included the seizure of Dublin Castle and other strategic targets, to be followed by what he hoped would be a largely spontaneous popular uprising. The planned insurrection, spearheaded on the 23rd July, 1802, was a disaster, resulting in the deaths of about fifty men, including Lord Kilwarden, the popular Lord Chief Justice, who was piked to death with his nephew when his coach was surrounded by insurgents. As his

plans unravelled, Emmet went on the run to the Wicklow mountains, but remained close to the city because of his protective anxiety for his lover, Sarah Curran, daughter of Whig M.P. and Master of the Rolls, John Philpot Curran. For the Romantic poets, Emmet achieved heroic definition, not only by the tragic consequences of his failed conspiracy, but by his speech from the dock, which has become a classic in Irish nationalist literature. Although he defended his involvement and motives, he spoke in full and clear knowledge of his fate. The next day he was hanged and then beheaded; his head was exhibited on a stockade in Thomas Street near to where Lord Kilwarden and his nephew had been piked to death. Emmet achieved his martyrdom. His place of burial and the whereabouts of his body remain uncertain to this day.

These events touched Moore deeply. While he did not involve himself in Irish politics, his patriotic convictions were never in doubt and he continually expressed his feelings in the best way he knew how- his melodies and poetry.

On Robert Emmet he wrote:-

*Oh breathe not his name, let it sleep in the shade,
Where cold and unhonour'd his relics are laid!
Sad, silent and dark, be the tears that we shed,
As the night-dew that falls on the grass o'er his head.*

On Hafed's reknown in the Fireworshippers, Moore writes:-

*Such were the tales that won belief,
and such the colouring Fancy gave
To a young, warm and dauntless Chief-
one who, no more than mortal brave,
Fought for the land his soul ador'd,
For happy homes and altars free,-
His only talisman, the sword,
His only spell-word, Liberty!*

And on Sarah Curran, who was forced into exile:-

*She is far from the land, where her young hero sleeps,
And the lovers are round her sighing,
But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps,
For her heart in his grave is lying!*

And on Hinda:-

*And still she goes, at midnight hour,
To weep alone in that high bower,
And watch, and look upon the deep
For him whose smiles first made her weep;-*

*But watching, weeping, all was vain,
She never saw his bark again.*

This is not great poetry but it does show how much Moore was more “at home” with his melodies, than his oriental poems. However, the comparisons are clear. In the notes to the first edition of *Lalla Rookh*, Moore hinted at his analogy when he wrote: “Voltaire tells us in his Tragedy ‘*Les Guebre*’, he was generally supposed to have alluded to the Jansenists. I should not be surprised if this story of *The Fire-Worshippers* were found capable of a similar doubleness of application”. And so Moore gave us *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* on the one hand and *Robert Emmet and the United Irishmen* on the other.

Paradise and the Peri and *The Light of the Harem* are much shorter and lighter in tone and allow Moore exhibit his outstanding lyrical talents for which he was renowned. By balancing two tales of revolution and bloodshed with two tales of love and devotion, he was trying to please everyone.

Lalla Rookh was a bestseller when published in 1817, requiring a second edition within three days and a sixth by the end of the year. Longman’s never regretted a penny of the £3,000.00 paid to Moore, and immediately recognized the poem’s illustrative potential inspiring the romantic imaginations of artists, dramatists and composers alike with its combination of drama, poetry, romance, pathos, fantasy, horror and exoticism. Praise was lavish. Jeffrey referred to Moore as “The Rising of a sun which will never set”. The work was translated into several languages, including Persian, and was famously referred to as a miniature *Arabian Nights*, a comparison which prompted Henry Luttrell, the elected wit of Holland House to write:-

I’m told , dear Moore, your lays are sung.
{Can it be true, you lucky man?}
By moonlight in the Persian tongue,
Along the streets of Ispahan.

Today, *Lalla Rookh* is forgotten. Parts of the poem can be fairly described as turgid reading. One of Moore’s recent biographers, Terence De Vere White, even goes so far as to describe the work as “almost unreadable”.

Moore, however, accepted praise and criticism alike; his self-appraisal was always cool and well judged. Twenty years after the publication of *Lalla Rookh*, he wrote to Thomas Longman, anticipating the verdict of posterity:-

“Dear Tom,
With respect to what you say about *Lalla Rookh* being “the cream of the copyrights”, perhaps it may in a *property* sense; but I am strongly inclined to think that, in a race into future times {if anything of mine could pretend to such a run}, those little ponies, the “Melodies” will beat the mare, *Lalla Rookh* hollow.”

Trust an Irishman to indulge his analogy in Horses

Imagine, though, Moore's reaction when he learned that *The Bride of Abydos-A Romantic Drama in Three Acts*, adapted by William Dimond, would be staged at Drury Lane Theatre, with Edmund Kean playing Selim.

Byron's reaction to reading *Lalla Rookh* is dealt with by Peter Cochran in *Byron and Orientalism* published by Cambridge Scholar's Press in 2006.

Byron, to his credit, continued to encourage Moore and played a great part in ensuring Moore kept to his task. In Moore's letter to Samuel Rogers on the 29th October, 1814, revealing the extent of his insecurity about *Lalla Rookh*, he states that the work was now destined to be a group of four tales rather than one extensive narrative. By March, 1817, Murray mentioned to Byron that Moore had decided on *Lalla Rookh* as a title. Byron wrote to Moore:

I am glad of it, -first that we are to have it at last, and next, I like a tough title myself-witness the Giaur and Childe Harold, which choked half the Blues at starting... I wish you had not called it a "Persian Tale". I am very sorry I called some of my own things "Tales", because I think they are something better. Besides, we have had Arabian, and Hindoo, and Turkish, and Assyrian Tales. ...Really I want you to make a great hit, if only out of self-love, because we happen to be old cronies...{BLJ5:186-87}

In Moore's case, Byron never allowed his critical doubts to outweigh his social loyalty.

Allan Gregory, Dublin, 2006