

Moral Instruction and Romantic Excitement in 18th Century Literature

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What relationship can be found between the concepts of moral instruction and romantic excitement in the literature of 18th century orientalism? On initial consideration these two concepts may seem to be unrelated. Moral instruction suggests some form of principled direct didactic discourse and romantic excitement brings to mind a much more emotional, sentimental frame of mind. Nevertheless, it will be shown these concepts interact and intersect each other so that moral instructions are often delivered within engaging romantic excitement.

Traditional romance might be thought of as based on love and courtship and characterised by chivalrous, devoted, sentimental or selfless actions. Romantic excitement is a broader term that invokes the atmospheric, evocative, glamorous, luxurious, sensuousness, exotic of new and novel experiences and excitement and which implies an emphasis on feeling, individuality, and passion rather than classical form and order.

Moral instruction is the means by which the difference between right and wrong is taught, either by the exposition of explicit rules, or by the use of examples from which those rules can be deduced.

The scope of Orientalism in this context is also relevant. Sambrook considers this in some detail (Sambrook, 1993 p. 216-9) noting that Pope, for instance, remarks in his preface to his translation of the *Iliad* that Homer's poem is very much in the language of Scripture and in the spirit of the Orientals. He also describes the strong body of academic learning in 17th and 18th century Oxford and elsewhere. But Sambrook also identifies the *Arabian Night's Entertainments* as 'a very different oriental idea' to the Orientalism invoked by

classical or biblical texts, and emphasises the variability in the ways a writer could respond to the Orient:

The variety of ways in which Orientalism could be employed is well indicated by the difference between Johnson's fable on the vanity of human wishes, the history of *Rasselas Prince of Abissinia* (1759) and William Beckford's exotic, sultry and decadent *History of the Caliph Vathek* (1786).

Sambrook, 1993, p. 218-219

Indeed the whole idea of the Orient was both romantic and tantalisingly frightening to the 18th century audience:

Sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-Romantic, pretechnical Orientalist imagination of late-eighteenth-century Europe was really a chameleonlike quality called (adjectivally) "Oriental."

Said, 1993, p. 118

Oriental tales from two quite different works will be considered here. *The Turkish Letters* (Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2003), a collection of Lady Mary Montagu's letters, written during her journeys in Europe and the Ottoman Empire, provide an eyewitness account of the experiences afforded by the Orient to the Western traveller. *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (Mack, 2009) is a collection of folk stories, derived mostly from Indian and Persian sources that were collected and edited by Galland in the 18th Century.

Montagu's letters provide us with a witty, intimate, detailed and entertaining window on the 18th century interface between cosmopolitan Western society and the exotic Ottoman empire.

While her writing has a veneer of assumed Western superiority, it also serves to provide a critical viewpoint juxtaposing the situation of women in Oriental and Western society.

Montagu is not just an observer of the orient; her work also reflects back on the western society she belongs to:

The female's Orient that Lady Montagu describes, simply by its portrayal, gives agency to the author and her subjects, while simultaneously proposing an alternative to the role of women that lies beyond the private sphere

(Dadabhoy, 2014).

Modern critics have attempted to identify Montagu as an early feminist. Lew (1991, p. 435) describes her as the "first feminist" and says "her descriptions of the Oriental women subverted order anticipated by two hundred fifty years those of feminists such as Mernissi and Abu-Lughad". But this is a 20th Century centric view. Montagu herself says she does not argue for the equality of the sexes:

God and nature has thrown us into inferior rank: We are a lower of the creation; we owe obedience and submission to the superior sex; and any woman, who ... denies this, rebels against the law of the Creator...

Halsband, R. (1965-1967), I p. 45 cited in Khrisat (na)

Critics also recognise Montagu's advantage over other foreign male travellers who did not have the kind of access that was available to her. Furthermore, Melman suggests that "because of her access and presumed feminine empathy with the Oriental subject, her work was read as more authentic." (Melman, 1992, cited in Ozdalga and Amanat, 2015).

As an actual eyewitness, Montagu is an authentic and accurate witness to the Orient. She provides many passages of literal prose detailing expertly and accurately the landscapes, town, cities, and population therein, together with the fashions and costumes of the social events she attends. She also comments extensively (and perhaps less reliably) on the social manners, culture, virtue, religions and morals of those she encounters.

Montagu even critiques the reliability of her own narration, first stating an intention to relaying everything truthfully in writing, "I think it a virtue to admire without any mixture of envy or desire" (Hefferman and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 133-134) while later taking the moral high ground when comparing herself to other observers:

Your whole letter is full of mistakes... you have taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. They never fail giving you an account of the women, which 'tis certain they never saw, and talking very wisely of the genius of the men, into whose company they are never admitted....

Hefferman and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 148

Montagu is characteristically forthright in discussing the morals of the Turkish Lady:

As to their Mortality or good Conduct, I can say like Arlequin, that 'tis just as with you, and the Turkish Lady's don't commit one sin the less for not being Christians...
 ibid., p. 11

'Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have, no woman, of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without two muslins, one that covers her face all but her eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head
 ibid., p. 114-5

Montagu sees the Oriental veiling of women as a distinct advantage, allowing not only anonymity “'tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her, and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street” (Hefferman and O’Quinn 2013, p. 114-5), but also opportunity for infidelity incognito – Montagu recognises such moral digressions are difficult if not impossible in London society where women in society are visible to all. Montagu’s viewpoint of Oriental woman is therefore uniquely different to other (male) Orientalists. But (male) critics still think Montagu contributes to the Oriental stereotype of

...pleasure, sexuality and lust. Although critics think that Montagu is a feminist, it seems that she is neither a voice for feminism nor a hero for feminists
 Khrisat (na).

There are many differences between Montagu’s *Turkish Letters* and the stories collected and presented by Galland in his version of the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment*. In Montagu’s work, the single author has the authority of an eyewitness to the events described and one who is a major character and participant in the letters which form the narrative discourse. Galland on the other hand is an integrator of stories originating well before his lifetime, possibly in differing cultures and countries.

The *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* contains elements of the supernatural and the fantastical (magic spells and potions, jinns, ghouls, ape-people, giants, sorcerers and imaginary creatures and lands) intermingled with real people and geography.

While the stories of the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment* provide humour and entertainment, according to Mack “they are primarily lessons in etiquette, aesthetics, decorum, religion, government history, and sex” (2009, p. xxii.). This is not a universal view however, as at least one editor, G.C Baskett, in revising selected stories for children’s consumption, attempted to comfort their parents “with the consolation that, while the tales themselves may offer a fanciful vision of the world to the total excusal exclusion of moral and didactic teachable” (ibid., p. xix).

It is not perhaps surprising that in such a vast and panoramic work as the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment* there are many different examples of moral instruction. These include themes of fidelity, charity, compassion, courage, mercy, respect, cooperation, forgiveness, love, trustworthiness, honesty, responsibility and tolerance. But the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment* does not directly preach to its audience, rather it is left to the reader to extract these lessons from their response to the stories.

In ‘The Story of the Little Hunchback’ (Mack, 2009, p. 222) and the tales embedded in it, moral instruction is underlined by humour. An extensive example is the slapstick nature of the ‘pass-the-parcel’ treatment of the supposedly dead body of the Hunchback. This is set up in the parent frame story where at Tailor’s table “unluckily the crooked gentleman swallowed a large bone of which he died in a few minutes.” (p. 223). The Tailor, fearing he killed the hunchback but shunning his moral responsibility, transports the body to a doctor, deceiving the doctor into treating a supposedly live patient. The hunchback’s body is however kicked down the stairs by the Jewish doctor: “the doctor was transported with joy being paid beforehand ... and that in such haste that, stumbling against the corpse, he gave it such a kick as made it tumble quite down to the stairfoot.” (p. 223). The doctor discards his morals and stuffs the body down a chimney “clapping ropes under his armpits, let him down the chimney into the [Sultan’s] purveyors chamber so softly and dexterously” (p. 224). The

Arab purveyor then props the body up in a shop doorway. It is then knocked down by a drunken Christian merchant:

...the corpse being jostled, tumbled on the merchant's back. ... [The merchant.] ... knocked him down with a swinging box on the air.

(p. 225)

The Jewish doctor, Muslim purveyor and Christian merchant all fail to fulfil their moral duty of care of the dead. However they are all brought to account, as, in reverse order, they are called before the chief justice. As they appear, they confess their immoral deeds and in doing so, save the subsequent perpetrator in the chain from execution. Eventually, the Sultan of Casgar (to whom the hunchback was court jester) hears the whole sorry story, declaring: "Did you ever hear ... such a surprising story as this that has happened upon the account of my little crooked buffoon" (p. 228). The reader is then entertained by a sequence of sub-frame stories. At the end of all of this, the Sultan is so amused he "looked with a contented air and gave the Taylor and his comrades their lives" (p. 304).

The original frame story, *The Story of the Little Hunchback*, is finally resolved as the fishbone is pulled from the hunchback's throat and the hunchback amazingly springs back to life. The Sultan then rewards the Taylor, Doctor, Purveyor and Christian Merchant by giving "them each a very rich robe which he caused them to be clothed in his presence" (p. 305). Only the poor hunchback sadly remains unrewarded. Thus the reader sees the morality of telling the truth, being responsible for their own actions, tolerance amongst cultures and religions and that good actions result in good outcome, but bad actions are punished. The miraculous resuscitation of the hunchback is a moral metaphor for the rebirth found in numerous places in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. Indeed just as the little hunchback lives through the many stories of the parent frame, to be reborn eventually, Scheherazade achieves her own continued existence by linking many stories until her own eventual rebirth from the Sultan's threat of execution.

Returning to the question of the relationship between romantic excitement and moral instruction, both *The Turkish Letters* and *The Arabian Entertainments* provide a vivid and dramatic picture of the Oriental exotic and contain many examples of how the participants thoughts and actions have either good or bad consequences.

In *The Turkish Letters* this drama is mirrored by Montagu herself, and is described by the young Joseph Spence who met Montagu in Rome and wrote to his mother:

Lady Mary is one of the most extraordinary shining characters in the world; but she shines like a comet; she is all irregular and always wandering. She is the most wise, most imprudent; loveliest, disagreeablest; best natured, cruellest woman in the world.
Spence, 1820, cited in Desai ,1991, p. xxiv

Montagu's writing, as in her personality, provides similar extremes for readers. *The Turkish Letters* evoke the romantic atmospheric, glamorous, luxurious, sensuousness and exoticism of the Orient while Montagu's feminine viewpoint offers a characterisation of the Oriental woman which also equally and critically illuminated the situation of women in 18th century Western society.

Taken together, both works contrast the natural and the supernatural, the realistic and the imaginary, the opulence, splendour and grandeur and the squalor, poverty, violence and bigotry of the Orient but do not directly instruct the reader. The reader becomes a participant in the discourse and must use the lessons they observe in the romantic excitement of the text to reach their own moral conclusions.

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