

THE GATEWAY TO THE EAST: BYRON'S FABULATION OF ISTANBUL IN AN ORIENTAL CONTEXT

Himmet UMUNÇ

Abstract: Istanbul with its rich history and inspiring geography has always attracted travellers from Europe and captivated the European mind. Especially, since the early modern times, the Europeans have viewed it not only as a major centre of the classical and Byzantine heritage and eastern Christianity but also, more importantly, as a city which epitomized oriental cultures and civilizations. In this latter sense, it has invariably been mythologized and considered to be a gateway to the Orient. It was certainly with a perception of Istanbul as such that Lord Byron privileged it as “the capital of the East.” In fact, his readings in his early life about the Orient had so much influence on him that, as a young man of 21, he set out in 1809 on a two-year journey, which, beginning from Portugal and Spain, took him to Ottoman Greece and Turkey. In the early summer of 1810 he was in Istanbul for a couple of months and, during his stay, he explored not only the city and the Bosphorus in a historical and geographical context but also had a close look into the Ottoman life and culture. Hence, while, on the one hand, he gave in his letters a colourful account of his impressions and observations of Istanbul, on the other, in his works, especially in *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, he drew a romanticized and fictional picture of the city, situated in an oriental setting and informed by his personal reveries of oriental sensualism and exoticism. So, this paper is a study and discussion of Byron's oriental fabulation of Istanbul and aims to demonstrate to what extent his fabulation turns Istanbul into an epitome of the oriental Other's values and ways of life.

Key words: Istanbul, Bosphorus, Orient, Orientalism, Byron.

Doğu'nun Kapısı:

Byron'ın İstanbul'u Doğu Bağlamında Masallaştırması

Özet: Zengin tarihi ve esin kaynağı olan coğrafyası ile İstanbul, Avrupalı seyyahları her zaman cezbetmiş ve Avrupalı'nın zihnini büyülemiştir. Özellikle, Yeni Çağ'ın başlarında, Avrupalılar, İstanbul'u, sadece klasik çağın ve Bizans'ın mirası ve Doğu Hıristiyanlığının önemli bir merkezi olarak değil, aynı zamanda ve daha da önemlisi, Doğu kültürlerini ve uygarlıklarını simgeleyen bir şehir olarak görmüşlerdir. Bu ikinci anlamda, İstanbul sürekli efsaneleştirilmiş ve Doğu'ya açılan bir kapı olarak algılanmıştır. Hiç kuşkusuz, İstanbul'u bu anlamda gördüğü içindir ki Lord Byron onu “Doğu'nun başkenti” olarak tanımlamıştır. Nitekim yaşamının erken yıllarında Doğu'ya ilişkin yaptığı okumalar, Byron üzerinde öylesine etki yapmıştır ki 21 yaşında bir delikanlı olarak, 1809'da, Portekiz ve İspanya'dan başlayıp, Osmanlı yönetimindeki Yunanistan'a ve sonra Türkiye'ye uzanan iki yıllık bir seyahate çıkmıştır. Böylece, bir yandan mektuplarında, İstanbul'a ilişkin izlenimlerini ve gözlemlerini renkli bir şekilde anlatırken, öte yandan eserlerinde, özellikle *Child*

Harold's Pilgrimage ve *Don Juan*'da, İstanbul'un romantik ve masalsı bir resmini çizmiştir; bunu yaparken, İstanbul'u bir Doğu dekoru içine oturtmuş ve anlatımını, Doğu'ya yönelik sefahat ve gizem hülyalarıyla zenginleştirmiştir. İşte bu makalede, Byron'ın, İstanbul'u, Doğu bağlamında masallaştırması ele alınmakta ve tartışılmaktadır; ayrıca, bu masallaştırmayı yaparken, Byron'ın, İstanbul'u, ne dereceye kadar Doğu *ötekiliğine* ait değerlerin ve yaşam biçimlerinin bir simgesi haline dönüştürdüğüünün ortaya konulması da amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: İstanbul, Boğaziçi, Doğu, Şarkiyat, Byron.

Istanbul with its rich history and inspiring geography has always attracted travellers from Europe and captivated the European mind. Especially, since the early modern times, the Europeans have viewed it not only as a major centre of the classical and Byzantine heritage and eastern Christianity but also, more importantly, as a city which epitomized oriental cultures and civilizations. In this latter sense, it has invariably been mythologized and considered to be a gateway to the Orient. It was certainly with a perception of Istanbul as such that, in his "Preface" to the first and second cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron privileged it as "the capital of the East" (Byron, 1980-1993, Vol. II, p. 3). In fact, in the early summer of 1810, that is, from early May nearly to the end of July (Byron, 1980-1993, Vol. II, p. 199), he was in Istanbul as a 22-year-old traveller and, during his stay, explored not only the city and the Bosphorus in a historical and geographical context but also had a close look into the Ottoman life and culture. Hence, while, on the one hand, he gave in his letters a concise and somewhat factual account of his impressions and observations of Istanbul, on the other, in his works, especially in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto II, Stanzas 77-83) and *Don Juan*, especially Cantos IV-VII, he drew a romanticized and fictional picture of the city with its slave market and seraglio, which was situated in an oriental setting and informed by his personal reveries of oriental sensualism and sexual exoticism. So, this article is mainly concerned with Byron's oriental fabulation of Istanbul and aims to demonstrate to what extent his fabulation turns Istanbul into an epitome of the oriental values and ways of life.

What one may call Byron's *oriental adventure* began on 2 July 1809, when he set out together with his entourage from Falmouth, south England, on board a packet boat bound for Lisbon (Byron, 1990, p. 53). He was on his way to the Ottoman Orient that he had always dreamed to visit since his childhood. This was his first journey to Ottoman Greece and Turkey, which he called "my pilgrimage" (Byron, 1990, p. 52), and was to last just over two years¹. When he was in Gibraltar, he wrote to his mother, giving a full account of his journey

¹ For an account of this journey, see Eisler, 1999, pp. 176-282.

through Lisbon, Sevilla and Cadiz². To the letter, dated 11 August 1809, he added a *postscriptum*, in which, in reacting to the news of his former friend and tenant Lord Grey de Ruthyn's marriage,³ he fantasized an oriental marriage for himself:

So Lord G[rey de Ruthyn] is married to a rustic. Well done! If I wed, I will bring home a Sultana, with half a dozen cities for a dowry, and reconcile you to an Ottoman daughter-in-law, with a bushel of pearls not larger than ostrich eggs, or smaller than walnuts (Byron, 1990, p. 56).

If one recalls that Byron was only a young man of 21, this oriental reverie of his may be regarded on the surface merely as a youthful flight of fancy. However, it indicates in him a rooted illusion of what he seems to cherish as oriental exoticism and sensualism, which he primarily associated with Istanbul.

In fact, the origins of Byron's oriental romanticism and revelries may be traced back to his childhood readings. Since he had learned reading fluently by the time he was five years old (Eisler, 1999, p. 22), he was particularly attracted to history; indeed, as he recalled later on, "the moment I could read—my grand passion was *history*" (qtd. Eisler, 1999, p. 22). Especially while at the grammar school as a boy of eight or nine, apparently much influenced by his mother's fondness for reading, he constantly read books of history and fiction, which, among others, included Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Tobias Smollett's naval adventure novel *Roderick Random* and Sir Walter Scott's romantic novels (Eisler, 1999, p. 26). Among his readings, particularly the fictional and historical accounts of the Orient made a lasting impact on his imagination. In his later years, he stated that, in his childhood he had been an avid reader of "all travels or histories or books upon the East I could meet with ... before I was *ten years old*" (qtd. Eisler, 1999, p. 26). Among them were *The Arabian Nights*, Richard Knolles's *Turkish History* (1701), Dimitrie Cantemir's *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire* (1734), Baron de Tott's *Memoires [...] sur les Turcs et les Tartares* (1784-85),⁴ Lady Montagu's *Embassy Letters* (1763), A. Hawkins's translation of Vincent Mignot's *History of the Turkish or Ottoman Empire* (1787) (Eisler, 1999, p. 26). In particular, Knolles's *Turkish History*, which he frequently cites in his oriental romances,⁵ must have mesmerized him since he claimed that it was "one of the first books that gave me

² For a full text of the letter, see Byron, 1990, pp. 52-56.

³ On Lord Grey de Ruthyn's lease of Byron's Newstead Abbey property, and his relationship with Byron himself and Catherine Byron, see Eisler, 1999, pp. 62 and 71-75.

⁴ For instance, see Byron's reference to Candemir and De Tott in *Don Juan*, Canto VI, Stanza, 31.

⁵ For instance, see *Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 147.

pleasure as a child; and I believe it had much influence on my subsequent wishes to visit the Levant, and gave, perhaps, the oriental colouring which is observed in my poetry” (qtd. Eisler, 1999, p. 26).

Byron’s oriental self-learning as such was further enhanced through his classical learning that had begun in his early childhood under private tutors (Berry, 1988, p. 155) and continued at Harrow School which he entered in 1801 when he was 13,⁶ and also at Cambridge where he was granted a master’s degree in 1808⁷. His reveries of the Ottoman Orient were mainly glamorized through his erotic fantasies and expectations. This is not unusual if one takes into account his sexual obsession and insatiable sensualism, which he invariably brings to the fore in some of his letters. In fact, ever since his Cambridge years, he had been charged with dissolute life and blamed for his notorious eroticism. For instance, in his letter to the family’s lawyer John Hanson, written on 30 November 1805 from Cambridge, he categorically rejected the charge of dissipation that Hanson seems to have made against him: “Your *indirect* charge of Dissipation does not affect me, nor do I fear the strictest inquiry into my conduct; neither here nor at Harrow have I disgraced myself” (Byron, 1990, p. 21).

Yet, in another letter, which he wrote to Hanson two years later, on 2 April 1807, he admitted the fact by referring to his “dissipated life” and stating that “Wine and Women have dished your humble Servant” (Byron, 1990, p. 27). Also in his letter of 5 July 1807 to Elizabeth Bridget Pigot, who was the sister of his friend John M.B. Pigot, Byron confessed: “My life here [viz. at Cambridge] has been one continued routine of dissipation” (Byron, 1990, p. 29). However, by 1810 he seems to have resolved to give up his dissipated way of life as one can understand from his letter, which he wrote on 5 May 1810 from the Dardanelles to his friend Francis Hodgson: “I am tolerably sick of vice, which I have tried in its agreeable varieties, and mean, on my return, to cut all my dissolute acquaintance, leave off wine and carnal company, and betake myself to politics and decorum” (Byron, 1990, p. 68).

However, despite his resolution as such to reform himself morally and sexually, it should be stressed that, for him, oriental exoticism signified as much erotic pursuits and gratification as wealth, plenty, carefree life, all kinds of pleasure, and a geography of paradisiac gardens with nightingales singing in them,⁸ of palaces and seraglios with “glittering galleries,”⁹ and of “nymph-like”¹⁰ sultanas

⁶ For Byron’s Harrow years, see Eisler, 1999, pp. 50-85.

⁷ For Byron’s Cambridge years, see Eisler, 1999, pp. 88-139.

⁸ See *The Bride of Abydos*, Canto I, Stanza 1, lines 5-10.

⁹ *Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 85, line 675.

¹⁰ *Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 99, line 798.

and concubines with “delicate limbs”¹¹. Hence, during his two-year journey to Greece and Turkey (1809-1811), which was, in a sense, his personal search for a taste of oriental exoticism or, to put it in Giovanna Franci’s words, “the search for a phantasmagoric world, a visit to the realms of Beauty” (Franci, 1988, p. 171), one of his aims was erotic fulfilment, which is often projected through his reveries. For instance, in his letter to his mother, dated 28 June 1810 and sent from Istanbul, he referred to his swim across the Hellespont and added an erotic touch to this Leander-like feat of strength by dreaming of Hero in mythology: “On the 3rd of May I swam from *Sestos* to *Abydos*. You know the story of Leander, but I had no Hero to receive me at landing” (Byron, 1990, p. 70, my italics for emphasis).

Yet, it was during his stay in Greece on this journey that his fantasy of an oriental love affair seems to have come true. While staying in Athens in the winter of 1809, he fell in love with three sisters who seemed to him like three goddesses; in writing to his Harrow master Henry Drury on 3 May 1810 from the Dardanelles, he referred to this affair: “I almost forgot to tell you that I am dying for love of three Greek girls at Athens, sisters. I lived in the same house. Teresa, Mariana, and Katinka, are the names of these divinities, -- all of them under fifteen” (Byron, 1990, p. 67).

However, he was apparently disappointed in his dream about Turkish women, probably due to their secluded domestic life and veiled appearance:

The Turks take too much care of their women to permit them to be scrutinised; but I have lived a good deal with the Greeks, whose modern dialect I can converse in enough for my purposes. With the Turks I have also some male acquaintances – female society is out of the question (Byron, 1990, p. 68).

It is within the context of Byron’s oriental reveries discussed so far that his fabulation of Istanbul is situated. In fact, what he reports in his letters about his contacts and daily life in Istanbul is in sharp contrast with his fabulation, which is thoroughly enriched by his fantasies and romanticism. His letters, apparently scribbled down in a hurry or in a lethargic mood, are extremely laconic and contain no significant details about Istanbul. For instance, in a letter, dated 15 May 1810, he reports factually:

We anchored between the Seven Towers and the Seraglio on the 13th, and yesterday [i.e. on the 14th] settled ashore. The ambassador is laid up; but the secretary does the honours of the palace, and we have a general invitation to his palace. In a short time he has his leave of audience, and we accompany him in our uniforms to the Sultan [i.e. Sultan Mahmut II], etc., and in a few days I am to visit the Captain Pacha with the

¹¹ Don Juan, Canto VI, Stanza 26, line 207.

commander of our frigate. I have seen enough of their Pachas already; but I wish to have a view of the Sultan, the last of the Ottoman race (Byron, 2009, Vol. I, p. 117).

This kind of laconic reporting is recurrent in all the other letters Byron wrote from Istanbul and provides little insight into the Turkish life and society of the time. Here is a very characteristic example of his laconism; in a letter to his mother, dated 24 May 1810, he wrote:

Of Constantinople you have of course read fifty descriptions by sundry travellers, which are in general so correct that I have nothing to add on the subject. When our ambassador takes his leave I shall accompany him to see the Sultan, and afterwards probably return to Greece (Byron, 2009, Vol. I, p. 119)¹².

So, it is through the narration of his oriental reveries and sexual illusions that Byron presents a fabulated image of Istanbul, which is shaped by fantasy rather than fact. In this regard, his reference to Istanbul in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* not only underscores his deep-seated philhellenism but, more importantly, also focuses on the pleasurable aspects of life, which he attributes to the city's Greek population; for him, despite their bondage under Turkish rule, the Greeks of Istanbul take full pleasure out of life in a carnival fashion through their Easter festivities, although their city, once "the empress" of the Byzantine empire, and their Byzantine heritage have now been usurped by the Muslims:

Some days of joyaunce are decreed to all,
To take of pleasaunce each his secret share,
In motley robe to dance at masking ball,
And join the mimic train of merry Carnival.
And whose more rife with merriment than thine,
Oh Stamboul! Once the empress of their reign?
Though turbans now pollute Sophia's shrine,
And Greece her very altars eyes in vain:
(Alas! Her woes will still pervade my strain!)
Gay were her minstrels once, for free her throng,
All felt the common joy they now must feign,
Nor oft I've seen such sight, nor heard such song,
As woo'd the eye, and thrill'd the Bosphorus along (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto II, Stanzas 78-79).

For Byron, coupled with the joy of the festivities is the moon-lit beauty of the Bosphorus, and this romantic and dream-like setting, further glamorized with night-boating on the waters, inspires love in young hearts and provides them the right occasion for courtship:

¹² For similar examples in Byron's other letters about Istanbul, see Byron, 2009, Vol.I, pp. 119, 121-122, 125-127 and 131.

Loud was the lightsome tumult of the shore,
Oft Music chang'd, but never ceas'd her tone,
And timely echo'd back the measur'd oar,
And rippling waters made a pleasant moan:
The Queen of tides on high consenting shone,
'Twas, as if darting from her heavenly throne,
A brighter glance her form reflected gave,
Till sparkling billows seem'd to light the banks they lave.

Glanc'd many a light caique along the foam,
Danc'd on the shore the daughters of the land,
Ne thought had man or maid of rest or home,
While many a languid eye and thrilling hand
Exchang'd the look few bosoms may withstand,
Or gently prest, return'd the pressure stil:
Oh Love! young Love! bound in thy rosy band,
Let sage or cynic prattle as he will,
These hours, and only these, redeem Life's years of ill!(Childe Harold's
Pilgrimage, Canto II, Stanzas 80-81).

Byron's erotic fabulation of Istanbul as such in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is further reiterated through his elaborate and fantastic descriptions of oriental femininity and harem life in *Don Juan*, which was written between 1819 and 1824, and in which Byron's reveries of the Ottoman Orient reach their climax (*Don Juan*, Canto IV, Stanzas 113-116 and Cantos V-VII). His representation of the Ottoman seraglio constitutes the core of his fabulation of Istanbul. Hence, it is not out of place to suggest that, in his erotic enslavement to Sultana Gulbeyaz, who is in fact the sultan's chief concubine, Don Juan can be perceived as a fictional projection of Byron himself, who, already mesmerized by his reveries of oriental sexualism, must obviously have been extremely intrigued during his stay by his fantasies about the seraglio. Byron begins the Istanbul part of Don Juan's story with a vivid depiction of the slave market (*Don Juan*, Canto IV, Stanzas 113-116 and Canto V, Stanzas 7-29), where slaves from different nations are put on sale:

A crowd of shivering slaves of every nation,
And age, and sex, were in the market ranged;
Each bevy with the Merchant in his station:
Poor creatures! Their good looks were sadly changed.
All save the blacks seem'd jaded with vexation,
From friends, and home, and freedom far estranged;
The negroes more philosophy display'd,-
Used to it, no doubt, as eels are to be flay'd (Don Juan, Canto V, Stanza
7).

It is to this slave market that Don Juan is brought aboard a pirate ship as a captive (*Don Juan*, Canto IV, Stanzas 75-81 and 113-116). While he is being led "on his way to sale" (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 114), it happens that his

youthful and good looks draw the attention of the sultan's chief concubine Gulbeyaz (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 114), who spots him among the other slaves and “[orders] him directly to be bought” (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 114). Don Juan is bought by a black eunuch on her behalf (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanzas 28-29) and smuggled into the seraglio (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanzas 40-85), where he is kept in disguise of a concubine and voluptuously courted by Gulbeyaz (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanzas 73-127 and 137-145).

In describing the seraglio with its magnificent chambers, halls and passages (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanzas 46, 51, 55-56, 64-65, 85-87, and 93-95), lush and Eden-like gardens (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanzas 40-42), “nymph-like” and voluptuous concubines and, indeed, the chief concubine Gulbeyaz (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 99 and Canto VI, Stanzas 26 and 29-54), Byron is clearly carried away by his oriental reveries and presents a romantic extravaganza that turns his fabulation of Istanbul into the narration of a sexual obsession and fantasy. In this regard, his portrayal of Gulbeyaz as a paragon of physical beauty recalls not only Botticelli's representation of the birth of Venus but also sums up his sexual exoticism:

The lady rising up with such an air
As Venus rose with from the wave, on them
Bent like an antelope a Paphian pair
Of eyes, which put out each surrounding gem;
And raising up an arm as moonlight fair,
[...]
Her presence was as lofty as her state;
Her beauty of that overpowering kind,
Whose force description only would abate (*Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanza 97)¹³.

Thus, to conclude, Byron's fantasy of Gulbeyaz and the seraglio translates Istanbul into an epiphanical metaphor through which all the exoticism and hedonism that Byron attributes to the Orient is revealed. Although in his letters and in the digressions that he makes in his poetical narratives Byron displays an antagonistic attitude towards Turkish society, culture and politics and regards the Turks as the oriental Other, his fabulations about the Ottoman Orient and Istanbul in particular present an exotic space in which, as a dreamer and mesmerized romantic, he seeks the fulfilment of his reveries and fantasies about oriental pleasures.

¹³ Also see *Don Juan*, Canto V, Stanzas 109-112.

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