INTRODUCTION

Radical Orientalism and the rights of man

In the summer of 1817, the journalist T. J. Wooler was imprisoned and tried for publishing what the British state deemed a "seditious libel" in his recently launched periodical, *The Black Dwarf*, which would become a leading mouthpiece for political reform. Wooler's offending article deprecated the right to petition enumerated in both the Magna Charta and 1689 Bill of Rights and informed his disenfranchised readers that "in reality, master Bull, you estimate all this boasted right *a little* too highly. Are you not aware that you only have it in common with the *free burgesses* of the Mogul; and the independent slaves of the Dey of Algiers?"[1] In reacting with legal charges, the government claimed that Wooler had defamed Britain's political institutions by equating the "boasted right" to petition with the paltry "power of complaining" available to the Muslim world's less than "independent slaves." The prosecutor, later seconded by an equally incensed judge, told the jury that "any man who, whether in printing or in conversation, asserts that the subjects of the Crown of England are no better off than the slaves of Algiers or the subjects of the despotic power of the Great Mogul of the Indian empire scandalizes the constitution of his country and calumniates the condition of the happy people of this realm."[2]

Wooler was acquitted, but the repercussions of his "calumny" reveal the ideological stakes in a strain of political rhetoric that we might call radical Orientalism.[3] By portraying British statecraft as barbarously foreign, reformist writers in the Romantic period solicited public support for changes to parliamentary representation, taxation, and the penal system, among other policy matters. While conservatives busily proclaimed Britain much "better off than" other "realms" to quiet revolutionary discontent, radical Orientalism aimed to alienate the allegedly "happy people" from their rulers. Or as the fear-mongering prosecutor in Wooler's case put it, the journalist's Orientalist derision of a "valuable right" sought "to excite disaffection in the minds of the king's subjects" or, worse yet, was "calculated to excite disturbances" (97). The state's alarmist response reveals the great

symbolic force that lay in leveling the "highly" exalted political privileges of Britons with the diametrical degradations of their Eastern counterparts. The "scandalized" reaction Orientalist rhetoric provoked among defenders of the status quo helps us better grasp its appeal to Romantic-era agitators for political and economic reform. Indeed, Wooler's publishing career was triumphantly launched through this conflict with the Crown, as he parlayed his trial into a cause célèbre that earned him a place in the pantheon of the radical press.

Wooler's invocation of Oriental thralldom also speaks to the tribulations that reformers suffered during and after the French Revolution, as their long-lauded rights to free speech, petition, and assembly were repeatedly curtailed. The successive waves of legal repression began with the anti-Jacobin fervor of the 1790s, continued during the "Buonapartephobic" nationalism of the 1800s and 1810s, and lasted through the post-Waterloo economic malaise of the late 1810s and early 1820s. In these tense times, Orientalism furnished a readymade aesthetic for traducing – in both of its meanings – the monarchy, ministers, Parliament, and privileged classes "Who worked [their] wantonness in form of law," as Byron put it in his final Turkish tale, *Lara* (1814).[4] This function explains why, when the agrarian proto-communist Thomas Spence was arrested for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1792, he resented "the indignity offered both to law and justice by these proceedings" and "remonstrated with the prostituted ruffians, and modestly asked them whether he was to consider himself in Spain, Turkey, Algiers, or England?"[5] Epitomizing "the rights of citizens so shamefully invaded," his unwarranted arrest made him feel "as though he were enchanted to one of the most despotic spots in the universe" (6). Spence's sense of Oriental transport – I stress how "Gothic" Spain was aligned with the Muslim world in the first chapter – even pushed him to "wonder" quasi-seditiously "if the complaints of individuals in this respect should drive them to acts of desperation" (6).

The cases of Wooler and Spence – distinct as to historical moment and political persuasion – evidence some of the ways critics of the British government marshaled Orientalist language. By exoticizing their situations, they could rhetorically "enchant" their listeners away to "the most despotic spots" and not so "modestly" anathematize the material and juridical conditions besetting British "citizens." This Orientalist framing of contemporary politics not only illuminates radical perspectives and tactics but must also inform our interpretation of the literary East produced by Romantics such as Lord Byron, the Shelleys, and others. As Marilyn Butler has argued, the period's Orientalist works often presented "lightly allegorized,

defamiliarized versions of the British state."[6] The political and economic critiques animating these estranging fictions require further analysis if we are to flesh out more fully the postcolonial truism that the Other is a foil for Western preoccupations. My method in this book is to treat the East invoked in periodicals, pamphlets and parodies, reformist tracts, and political philosophy as coterminous with exotic "romances." What I classify as "radical Orientalism" thus runs the gamut from mere mentions of Turkey or Algiers and brief comparisons of East and West to the longer verse of Byron, Shelley, and reform satirists. Like Kevin Gilmartin, "I have not mined radical prose as a footnote to romantic poetry."[7] But neither have I done the inverse, wishing instead to show, as have splendid studies situating Blake in the context of 1790s cultures, how Romantic authors and radical reformers alike channeled a potent Orientalism that "excited" political dissidents.[8]

This geoaesthetic imaginary connects the public turmoil that embroiled the period to the art we now call Romantic. Literary scholarship on radical culture has tended to privilege reformers and their writings, taking up the Romantics only insofar as their works were referenced or pirated.[9] If Shelley's engagement with radicalism has received substantial attention,[10] Byron for various reasons has been seen as more removed from the "radical underworld."[11] The fantastic Orient not only binds the two poets but also gave them the possibility, thanks to its populism, to engage plebeian radicals and partly overcome the class barriers separating their worlds.[12] That easterly allusions are inextricable from romance is suggested by Byron's impassioned defense of the Luddite weavers in the House of Lords in 1812: "I have been in some of the most oppressed provinces of Turkey, but never under the most despotic of infidel governments, did I behold such a squalid wretchedness as I have seen since my return in the very heart of a Christian country."[13] Like contemporary radicals, Byron is opportunistic in his Orientalism: he deploys sectarian sentiment to besmirch the economic cruelties of his compatriots while impugning Britain's technological advances by comparing its "squalid" countryside with Turkey's downtrodden dominions. This rhetorical relay between Orientalist imaginary and egalitarian commitments may help explain why, as Engels noted in his 1840s study of the Manchester proletariat, both Byron and Shelley found an enduring audience among the British working classes of the nineteenth century.[14]

Why should Orientalism have appealed to radicals? This book illustrates the extent to which it offered pro-reform Britons a forceful way to articulate the rights they were due by society. This argument builds on Saree Makdisi's characterization of Mary Wollstonecraft's Turkish allusions in *Rights of*

Women as "a conflation of the enemies of the liberal-radical cause, the aristocratic enemy and the Oriental enemy, in which the faults of the former are rewritten and overcoded in terms of the faults of the latter."[15] I expand upon Makdisi's insight by looking beyond his purview of the 1790s and specifying the oppositional vectors of a radical Orientalism that extends well into the 1820s. As part of this cultural formation, I include the literary output of Byron (the Turkish tales, *Sardanapalus*, *Don Juan*), Percy Shelley (*The Revolt of Islam*, *Swellfoot*, *Hellas*), and Mary Shelley (*The Last Man*). In reconstructing the overlap between reformist discourses and a portion of the Romantic canon, I aim to complicate the picture of Orientalism that has been drawn since Edward Said's landmark scholarship. By treating exoticism as a serious object of analysis, Said resurrected artifacts for too long dismissed as escapist and frivolous. His description of the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that course through Orientalism influences all subsequent postcolonial criticism as well as the following pages' insistence on the ambivalence in radical representations of the Eastern Other.

Still, I depart fundamentally from Said's central claim that Orientalist art primarily voices imperial designs. In the wake of his powerful intervention, the word "Orientalism" no longer merely denotes a type of content dealing with "the East," variously construed, but now presupposes a predetermined ideological agenda. In Said's oft-quoted words, such works peddle "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')."[16] Although doubtlessly true of much exoticism, the radical Orientalist archive in this book demonstrates the extent to which the "strange" East was intimately "familiar" to Britons, either in the form of repressive governance at home (Chapters 1–3) or as a yearning to escape the moral regulations of normativity (Chapters 4–5). Not all Romantic-era invocations of the East were meant to reify "a 'structure of attitude and reference' that entitles the European authorial subject to hold on to an overseas territory, derive benefits from it, depend on it, but ultimately refuse it autonomy or independence."[17] This Saidian verdict on André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1901) has become a generalized judgment, so that the appearance of ethnic or cultural difference in Western writing necessarily entails an imperial wish to "hold on to an overseas territory."

In this vein, Nigel Leask has portrayed the Romantic period's Orientalist poetry as conjuring "the unbreakable spell of the Other for our (by constitution imperial) culture and those peoples subjugated in its name."[18] This account, I will show, neglects the East's domestic role during the

Romantic period, in Makdisi's words, "as the ideal surrogate target for radical critique, an imaginary space on which to project all the supposed faults of the old regime and then subject them to attack, scorn, condemnation, repudiation" (*Blake* 206). I modulate Makdisi's account in several ways. First, I emphasize that radicals did not just demonize sultans, pashas, and deys but often identified with the plight of the Middle East's proverbially exploited subjects. The presence of "Oriental enemies" both at home and abroad shows that marginalized Britons recognized their own lot in the oppression suffered by their Eastern neighbors. The "Oriental enemy," then, was not "Oriental" peoples in general but rather a mode of governance, which denied humans in the East the same rights the British were still fighting to secure from their own "Western Turks," as Richard Carlile termed his nation's elites.[19] Solidarity with distant and tyrannized subjects runs through much of radical Orientalism, as we glimpse in Wooler's ironic identification with the Muslim world's "independent slaves" and Spence's outlook on his Eastern "enchantment."

Spence brings me to another divergence from Makdisi's reading. The radical Orientalism I document did not inexorably entail a "bourgeois . . . project to locate and articulate a middle-class sensibility as against the unruly excesses of both higher and lower orders" (*Blake* 207). Spence and Wooler, like other plebeian reformers, do not summon the despotic East to serve the interests of "*free burgesses*" just as the radical Orientalism of aristocratic Byron and Shelley cannot be assimilated to bourgeois aspirations. Indeed, it might well be the diversity of class perspectives out of which Orientalist representations arise that makes them so multifarious. If Makdisi is right that "for Wollstonecraft and Paine the contours of individual freedom must be defined by voluntary self-regulation, self-limitation, self-denial – a rejection of figurative and verbal, as well as bodily and sensual, excess" (*Blake* 226) and that Orientalism "represent[s] . . . the locus of the body, and all the sensual drives and desires, against which the virtuous West must struggle to define itself" (227), nonetheless, it is far from clear that Romantic-era exoticism inculcates only middle-class values. For just as important, I think, is a cross-class fascination with and aesthetic recuperation of those illiberal vices on which Eastern fantasies trade.

It is undeniably true that exoticism commodifies and exploits the very differences it both indulges and disavows, a phenomenon Timothy Morton has called the "poetics of spice."[20] By travestying Britain in this way, radical Orientalism achieved not just political trenchancy but also commercial success. What Leask says of Byron – that he "speaks like a Levantine or East India merchant who has tapped a lucrative source of raw

materials in a newly opened up Orient, which he feels will make a splash on the home market" (13) – could well apply to plebeian Orientalists. The mix of marketable entertainment and ideology critique, for instance, stands out in the four Orientalist satires published by William Benbow in 1820 and 1821.[21] As Iain McCalman says of Benbow, "he was among the crudest of the gutter pressmen, but he also had a knack of conveying a radical political message."[22] By depicting George IV and his agents as Oriental apparatchik, Benbow protected himself from prosecution and courted controversy, aims that no doubt incited Shelley to write his own *Revolt of Islam* in the first place. In the third chapter of this book, I detail at greater length the economic Orientalism of Benbow's publications, which indict the British state's felonious finances. But right now, I want to emphasize the populist appeal of this radical art. It was indeed "crude" but as a result, its political messaging was easily discerned. Polemical power redounds in the images that Benbow appended to his satires, such as the caricature for *Sultan Sham and his Seven Wives*, showing George as a paunchy sultan cavorting with his many mistresses (see Figure 1). The image mobilizes for domestic purposes the oft-commented possibility of polygamy under Islam as George IV proclaims that "variety is charming, constancy is not for me." The print visually communicates how much Orientalist cliché and Carolinite radicalism reinforced each other. Benbow saw this satire as so representative of his professional identity that he commissioned a caricature of himself selling the evocative etching to a well-heeled customer, who is being told which of George's harem women is his own wife.[23]

Obviously, this Orientalist vignette is essentialist and derogatory, reflecting Benbow's entitlement to use Muslim markers for his own purposes and perhaps signaling his imperial privilege to steal and stereotype. But such an assessment, correct as it is, does not fully explain the cultural logic animating the stylized images of Eastern politics and economics dreamed up by dissenting Britons of the Romantic period. As Eric Lott has argued in his study of American blackface minstrelsy and working-class audiences, more may be said about the "theft" of ethnic difference than that it enacts racial domination.[24] Our laudable desire to exorcize the ghosts of imperial oppression should not lead us to ignore the complexities of such cross-cultural borrowings. Hence, as A. O. Lovejoy once insisted, I want to "discriminate" between Orientalisms.[25] I consequently use the term in its neutral taxonomic sense, adding the label "radical" when the aim is reformist. I do not contest the coexistence of imperial effects but focus instead on these allegories' domestic implications. As Srinivas Aravamudan has said regarding his own store of "Enlightenment Orientalism," such works should not

Figure 1 Frontispiece to *Sultan Sham and his Seven Wives* (1820)

summarily be dismissed as "colonial propaganda or imperial blueprints, even if they can be refashioned as such after the fact."[26] The radical Orientalist imaginary tracked in this book did not, in the main, seek to justify military occupation and, at times, explicitly undermined Britain's delusions of world conquest by likening them to Muslim empire-building.

This intentionalist account sets me at odds with the readings of Leask and Makdisi. For these scholars, to represent the Other and take advantage of its difference ultimately amounts to supporting imperial hierarchies. As Makdisi puts it, "[w]ithout this contrast" between East and West in 1790s radicalism, "nineteenth-century British imperialism would not have worked" (*Blake* 232). Rehearsing Said's Foucauldian power-knowledge hermeneutics, such an approach subordinates the motives behind Orientalist allusions and narratives to the act of discursive appropriation itself, taking the romance with cultural Otherness as a drive to subjugate through language. This metonymic leap between textual and territorial incorporation allows Makdisi to segue smoothly from Orientalism's geopolitical complicity to

Wordsworth's "power over the landscape, over an exotic object world, over the visual field in general . . . synonymous with his ability to know and to represent it, just as, for the great prophets of nineteenth-century British imperialism, the empire's power over its colonies would be precisely synonymous with its knowledge of them."[27] As a consequence of this interpretative maneuver, representation tout court becomes colonial, stripping empire of its material history in military violence and economic expropriation.

Relatedly, I forbear from the aestheticist temptation to attribute radical Orientalism's dissidence to authorial genius. In this manner, Leask argues that there are "moments" in Byron and Shelley that go "against the grain of history" (4), much as Edward Said partially absolves Gustave Flaubert from collaboration with the French Empire because of his artistry. For Makdisi, too, critiquing 1790s Orientalism sets up his elevation of William Blake as eloquent opponent of empire, an appreciation he founds on the poet's triumphant marginalization from "hegemonic" colonial culture. I will not claim that Shelley and Byron "subverted" the inherent ideology of Orientalism. Rather, they partook of the same cultural stereotypes that contemporary reformers used to assail a heedless monarchy, a corrupt party system, an excessively repressive penal code, economic spoliation, and other iniquities. I thus place front and center a popular and quite possibly "vulgar" Orientalism that had wide purchase rather than give in to a critically modernist desire to valorize the ambiguities and complexities of a Romantic art that resists inscription within dominant structures of feeling.

I have come to this contrarian view on Orientalism from the perspective of queer studies. In an utterly generic fashion, a long line of alienated Western writers looked East to articulate their sexual nonconformity. Gide's *Immoralist* is a prominent example. It strikes me as inadequate to boil down that work's politics to imperial wish fulfillment, as Said does. Gide was participating in an erotic convention perhaps inaugurated by William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), continued through Byron and his Turkish tales as I argue in Chapters 1 and 5, passing by Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891), Forster's *Passage to India* (1924), and beyond. This genealogy demonstrates how frequently objection to European sexual mores has been couched in a luxuriantly sensual East, a move certainly facilitated by empire but not reducible to it.[28] The topos of Oriental sexual pluralism, and the fetish of the harem in particular, could, of course, serve colonial and sexist ends, as many critics have argued.[29] But other scholars have begun to show how central Orientalist rhetoric was to the rise of Western feminism from the eighteenth century onward.[30] In naming this instrumentalization of the

Other "radical," I am not exonerating it from essentialism but rather teasing out the political and cultural work eastward gestures did for marginalized Britons. Grasping the Orient's lure as a representational weapon in the battles between the forces of reform and those of reaction helps us account more fully for the proliferation of exoticism in the nineteenth century and the multiplicity of ambitions it could and did encode. It also allows us to better appreciate the Middle East's enduring centrality as an imaginative and rhetorical resource for the Western construction of democratic values.

But in tying this radical Orientalism to "the rights of man," I have also wanted to echo feminist, queer, and postcolonial concerns over utopian liberalism's blindness to the diversity of embodiments and aspirations. Universalist mottos of "happiness" and "humanity" too frequently reify ethnocentric, masculinist, and class-based assumptions. Still, if Orientalism promoted "the constitution of a transcendental viewing subject from whose philosophical, aesthetic, and phenomenological standpoint the culture of (Western) modernity could be understood and defined," a simultaneous motivation for summoning the East lay precisely in its power to rebuff a standardizing version of the human species.[31] The discrepancy evinces the "productive ambivalence" of Orientalist stereotypes, which alternately elicit "desire and derision," as Homi Bhabha has put it.[32] This dynamic plays out most elaborately in my third and fourth chapters on property rights. I show how reformers decried inequality and the state's fiduciary frauds as Eastern confiscation and corruption. At the same time, their Orientalization of expenditure promulgated an economic morality of self-control and virtuous labor founded in misogyny. I propose in Chapter 4, however, that Byron and Mary Shelley could attack sexist norms of self-possession by valorizing those obstinate bodies, foreign or effeminate, which abstained from liberal rationality. In a similar vein, the first chapter highlights the equivocation of Gothic and Eastern romances where the legal guarantee to physical security and its ideal of manly impenetrability were repeatedly and pleasurably violated. These complications divulge that radical Orientalism articulated at once "the rights of man" and a perverse riposte to their homogenizing account of personhood.

While acknowledging the exclusionary norms in liberal theories of the subject, I do not subscribe to the notion that liberalism is imperial because universalist, an argument most incisively formulated by Uday Mehta. An increasingly omnipresent Marxian critique sees the mantra of rights and the rule of law as ruses for imposing the "empire" of a capitalist world order.[33] But if liberalism is inherently imperial, it is only in the sense of

all theory claiming general applicability, as exemplified by postcolonial theory itself, which has gone from explaining particular colonial contexts to annexing anti-capitalist thought wholesale.[34] By more strikingly framing class relations as a contest between cultures (the imperial bourgeoisie versus the colonized proletariat), postcolonial theory has rewritten capitalism's compromises as an emancipation battle between crooked economic elites and popular freedom fighters. Tellingly, this vision does to liberalism what radical Orientalism did to the ancien régime. The aesthetic resonance between their monstrous visions of social subjugation – distilled in Marx's controversial idea of an "Asiatic mode of production" – reveals how much the oppositional imaginary of modern left critique owes to liberalism.

In sticking to the old-fashioned view of empire as military coercion (religious, liberal, and other rationalizations notwithstanding), I do not deny the sway of soft discursive power, but I think calling the spread of rights language "cultural imperialism" condescends to those who have embraced this juridical model for its obvious benefits. Since liberalism is founded in self-determination – both at the individual and national levels – it is bad faith to call advocates of martially backed "modernization" (J. S. Mill, most notoriously) the truest representatives of the liberal tradition. Indeed, as Jennifer Pitts has shown, early liberal thought was frequently anti-imperial.[35] The cooption of liberalism by supporters of empire must be seen as a case of colonialism remarketing itself as liberation in an age that less and less tolerated naked domination: hypocrisy is the tribute imperial vice pays to liberal virtue. Otherwise, we end up paradoxically championing a conservative localism like that of Edmund Burke, whom Mehta has argued should be seen as more tolerant than Jeremy Bentham because his respect for organic change defers to tradition.[36] Antipathy to Enlightenment systematicity, a hallmark of Romantic-era reaction, can thus be read anachronistically as multicultural respect for diversity and historical particularity.

It is surely ironic, then, that "the moral and political indignation that Burke voiced against the injustices, cruelty, caprice, and exploitation of the empire" should at one point have found expression through the same reformist imaginary this book taxonomizes.[37] In seeking to transform the commercial despotism of the East India Company, as scholars have argued, into a more Whiggish version of empire, Burke makes a universalist argument through Orientalist aspersion, but of the Ottoman rather than Indian variety.[38] During Warren Hastings's trial in 1787, he strenuously denied that India's people should be governed arbitrarily, calling this logic a relativist argument for "geographical morality." For Burke, Hastings's localist defense