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Comparative Perspectives: 22

Edited by E. S. Shaffer

Excerpt

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PART I

East and West:  
comparative perspectives

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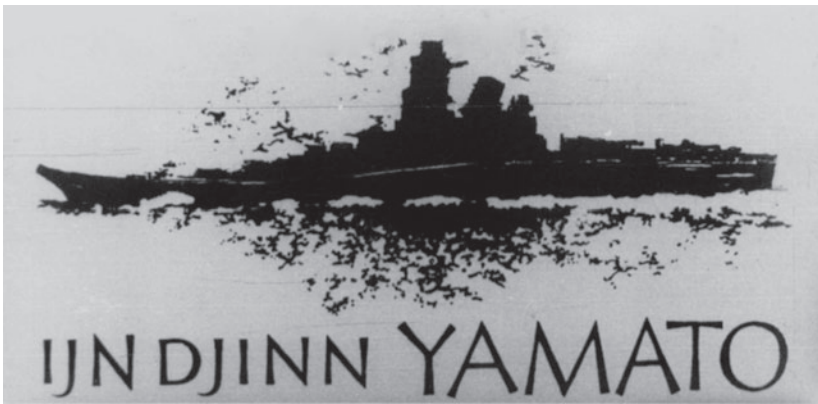


Illustration from *Heroic Emblems* by Ian Hamilton Finlay and Ron Costley<sup>1</sup>

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## Afloat on the sea of stories: world tales, English literature and geopolitical aesthetics

PETER L. CARACCILO

I

My title might seem to promise a study of Rushdie's use of Somadeva. Alas, there is space here for little more than a reconnaissance of the Western approaches to that Ocean of Otherness. The chief aim of this essay is to explore a largely uncharted tradition in the English novel whereby Buddhist allusions form a vital part of a subtle critique of empire. Even so, the way my title evokes that charming fable, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, does emphasize a factor that is crucially relevant in this area, reminding us that more rides on the back of stories than just entertainment. An egregious example of this may be found in an Edwardian edition of the *Arabian Nights*, where a concern with global power relationships manifests itself. The editor stresses that:

for Englishmen, whose empire contains so many millions of Moslems, this study of the Nights is of high importance; it is not possible to govern well without understanding of the governed and sympathy with their feelings and thoughts, and only through knowledge can come that wise tolerance which wins trust and enables the ruler to control, to improve, to reform.<sup>2</sup>

The assumption of superiority here is risible; nevertheless we should not allow ourselves to be distracted into thinking that the editor W. H. D. Rouse totally distorts politically innocent tales when he puts this complacent spin upon the *Nights*. Rather, we need to recognise that Rouse is shrewdly exploiting an imperialistic dynamic inherent in *The 1001 Nights* themselves.

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In a collaborative study of the *Nights*' influence on English literature,<sup>3</sup> my colleagues and I mapped the influence that the great story-collection had on the dreams of the Romantics, Victorian realism and the problematic visions of the twentieth-century avant-gardes. This Eastern storehouse supplied images for widely differing attitudes: patriarchal, suffragette, conservative, radical, materialist, spiritual. Allusions to the *Nights*, for instance, have been used by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1805, 1850) to remind the British reader of Islam's role in preserving civilization during Europe's Dark Ages, and by Maria Edgeworth in *The Absentee* (1812) to suggest that early nineteenth-century Ireland might profit by taking note of the higher standard of government that had been exemplified in Baghdad under the Caliphate.<sup>4</sup> What it seems could not easily be done with the *Nights* was to voice an anti-imperialist message. For all that Macaulay excoriated the East India Company's misrule of Bengal as resembling 'the government of evil Genie', his attack is not directed at the concept of empire itself.<sup>5</sup> Although Robert Louis Stevenson's South Sea novels have an anti-colonialist tendency, the novelist's attempts to introduce these criticisms through arabesque references are nowhere as resonant as an allusion to the *Nights* found in *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). There, after the defeat of the French in India, a rueful Irish Jacobite likens himself to 'one of those calendars with whom Monsieur Galland has made us acquainted in his elegant tales'.<sup>6</sup> What the vast geographical reach of the Arabian stories enabled Stevenson to do in this earlier masterpiece was to celebrate the role played by the Celts in the growth of the British Empire.<sup>7</sup> 'The Story of the three Calendars, Sons of Kings; and the five Ladies of Bagdad' is a microcosm of the geopolitical poetics of the *Nights*. Indeed, one of the constituents of this story-group, Zobeide's tale of the Petrified City, may be easily recognized as a poetic version of Islam's conquest of Hindu-Buddhist India.<sup>8</sup> This story of the eldest lady is told to the Caliph; and as the inner tale here is of religious aggrandizement, so the outer narrative concerning the sleepless Haroun is a story of how empire must be maintained. The larger frame-tale of the *Nights*, in which Scheherazade tells stories for dear life to her homicidal husband, shows the legitimate preoccupation of a ruler distorted into paranoia. Yet in the *Nights* there is never any questioning of 'the claim of the ancient kings of Persia, who extended their empire into the Indies, over all the islands thereto belonging, a great way beyond the Ganges and as far as China' (p. 1).

Small wonder that even after the Indian Mutiny, as *The Spectator* (14

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July 1866) observed, most Victorians still relied upon the *Nights* for much of their knowledge about the Orient.<sup>9</sup> True, in *The Moonstone* (1868), which of all Victorian works of fiction seems the most hostile to the empire, Wilkie Collins also constructs his novel around 'The Story of the three Calendars', but this arabesque key to the anti-colonial theme is wittily concealed.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, though, towards *The Moonstone's* close there reappears an important witness who is able to finally solve the mystery of the Sacred Diamond. Murthwaite has returned from what is an early episode of the Great Game, 'wandering in Central Asia' disguised as a 'Hindoo-Booddhist'.<sup>11</sup> In this Mahayana-Buddhist allusion there is a pointer to another Eastern literary model, though Collins was not the first to glimpse its socio-critical potential.

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Hints of this alternative Asian genre are detectable among the oeuvre of what might seem a quintessentially eighteenth-century neo-classical novelist. A reference in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) suggests its author had considerable knowledge of the *Nights*.<sup>12</sup> More telling, though, is the way in which Fielding injects a slightly unusual religious note into this 'comic epic in prose' by basing his burlesque upon more than just Homeric and Biblical models. What appears to have escaped scholarly notice is that Fielding uses an Indian legend as potent as the stories of 'Ulysses's Homecoming' or 'Joseph and his Brethren'. Book III, chapter 13 features 'A curious Dialogue between Parson Adams and Peter Pounce'; this debate about charity and hypocrisy is one of the thematic centres of the novel. Defending his heartless attitude towards the half-starved and ill-housed poor, the corrupt Steward Peter Pounce condescendingly informs Abraham Adams (to whom he has given a lift in his chariot) that after all 'there are whole Nations who go without [clothes]' (p. 214). Adams's role in the novel is that of the Holy Fool; but, while the Parson may be unworldly, he is far from lacking scholarship and cannot be thus patronized. His riposte is sharply pointed, a tart reminder that the Hindu ascetics were already known to the Ancient Greeks. Irritated by Adams's mention of 'the *Gymnosophists*', the Steward curses 'A plague of your *Jehosaphats*' (p. 215). This name has puzzled modern audiences. Fielding scholars identify this mysterious figure as 'Jehoshaphat' the righteous king of Judah in

the Old Testament<sup>13</sup> – which hardly seems apropos. It is a big leap from Hindu sadhus to false and true prophets in ancient Palestine, there being no naked philosophers in the Hebrew books of I Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 18. So was it to the Old Testament that Pounce was alluding, or was the reference to the eponymous hero of a different story? The alternative that I am here proposing is a legend which originated in the Indian subcontinent and eventually reached the West in the Middle Ages. Thereafter this Indian legend spread widely throughout Europe. Even in English the story had long been circulating in a variety of forms, when the late seventeenth century saw yet another version. In 1672 one H. P. Gent published *The History of the Five Wise Philosophers, the Wonderful Relation of the Life of Jehosophat the Hermit, son of Avenario, king of Berma in India*.<sup>14</sup> During Fielding's lifetime (1707–54), three more editions of this book appeared (1711, 1725, 1732). The third edition antedates the first appearance of *Joseph Andrews* by just a decade. *The Five Wise Philosophers* is a Christianized version of the Buddha's Great Renunciation (of, inter alia, worldly power), a legend most commonly known to anglophone readers as *The Book of Barlaam and Ioasaph or Josaphat*.<sup>15</sup>

Fielding, of course, does use to comic effect Biblical parallels; the story of 'Potiphar's Wife' provided the novelist with the model for the vain attempts made by Lady Booby (also by her companion, Mrs Slipslop, and sundry other women) on the chastity of her husband's young manservant. But in the legend of Jehosophat, too, there occur significant episodes where the improper sexual advances of a great lady and her handmaidens are rejected by the hero, another male virgin (though like Joseph no misogynist either).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the parallels between the events of Fielding's burlesque and the Barlaam story are more extensive than those between the adventures of young Andrews and the Biblical hero. Needless to say, there is in the legend nothing of the diverting bawdy of *Joseph Andrews*; yet in essentials the affinities of the two plots are striking. In the novel as in the Indian legend, the eponymous hero meets a Christian mentor, who teaches love of the poor, whose dress is ill-kempt, and who is scorned as a fool by the worldly;<sup>17</sup> in the novel as in the legend the resolutely chaste young man leaves the temptations of the city for the country, seeking a higher object of desire:<sup>18</sup> admittedly, Enlightenment is Jehosophat's goal, and Fanny's love Joseph's; still, in those recensions where the young protagonist of this 'spiritual romance' is called Ioasaph, the heroes' names even sound alike. As basically Joseph and Adams are doubles, so too Barlaam and

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Jehosopha. Such mirroring devices in common mean that other parallels between Fielding's narrative and a full version of the crypto-Buddhist legend become apparent when a ride in a chariot provides the occasion for that moral debate about abstinence noted above; like Barlaam, though without his success, Adams attempts the conversion of an avaricious man.<sup>19</sup> Certain of the structural features of *Joseph Andrews*, especially the tales within tales, could as well derive from other influences on the novelist, the Ancient and Medieval Romances, Cervantes, and not least the *Arabian Nights*. However, in one particular area a closer identification of structural affinities seems possible. The use of parables, a teaching device common to both Buddhism and Christianity, is a distinctive parallel between the Barlaam story and Fielding's novel. Although in some versions of *Barlaam and Josaphat* up to nine parables are deployed,<sup>20</sup> in *The Five Wise Philosophers* there are only two. This is exactly the number to which Fielding restricts himself, the more memorable of the two parables in *Joseph Andrews* being that mordantly ironic variant of the Good Samaritan (p. 41).

These parallels raise the question as to what the purpose of the burlesque is. Plainly it is not intended to mock the Indian original. Elsewhere, in *The Author's Farce* (1730), Fielding attacks the dishonesty shown by the directors of the East India Company.<sup>21</sup> Since he held some of the Company's stock, his criticism was to a degree self-interested.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in the period when English traders began to emerge as a territorial power in India,<sup>23</sup> the reference to the Barlaam story in *Joseph Andrews*, like the later allusions in *Tom Jones* (1749) to a caste of Hindu merchants who on religious grounds are vegetarians,<sup>24</sup> should give us pause. These allusions indicate more than just a curiosity about Indian beliefs (albeit the novelist called them 'superstitions') that at this time is rare among those associated with 'the Honourable Company'. Also the allusions evince some awareness that this Asian spirituality offered yet another moral standard by which the vices and follies of English society might be judged.

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Oblique, fleeting, partially self-interested though Fielding's satire of the East India Company might be, nevertheless it is possible to glimpse here the germ of later and more direct challenges to the British Raj. The closest correspondence is that between Fielding's first masterpiece and

what Nirad C. Chaudhuri has praised as ‘the finest story about India – in English’.<sup>25</sup> Just consider how much *Joseph Andrews* and *Kim* (1901) have in common. The chastity of Kipling’s hero takes on new significance when we note the other parallels with Fielding’s protagonist: there is the comic yet touching relationship between an increasingly competent youth and a holy man, loveable in his unworldliness. Although both can take care of themselves in a fight, the older men are often the more innocent; so that as these novels proceed, the roles of mentor and pupil appear to switch. The reader is left uncertain who is guiding whom as they learn to cope with the problems of the world that are revealed by their adventures on the road. For theirs are journeys that in varying degrees combine quest and picaresque. Tellingly, both narratives further deploy references not only to the *Nights* but also to one of the birth tales of the Buddha. The arabesque and Buddhist allusions naturally play a lesser role in *Joseph Andrews* than they do in *Kim*. The manner in which Kipling’s young hero is associated with the adventures of the disguised ‘Haroun al Raschid’ prepares us for Kim’s role in the Great Game of counter-espionage, whereby the British Raj is defended.<sup>26</sup> Yet the imperial allegiances and methods recalled by the arabesque allusions to the surveillance of Caliphate Baghdad do not go unopposed in Kipling’s novel. Prince Gautama’s rejection of worldly values is implied by both the Lama’s recital of the Jataka of the Elephant Calf (ch. 9, pp. 235–7), and that selfless postponement of Nirvana which identifies the saintly old Tibetan as a reincarnation of the Buddhist saviour.<sup>27</sup>

This *contemptus mundi* note here takes on a peculiarly Victorian meaning when we recall that Penelope Fitzgerald recognized in Kipling’s old monk something of Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Rudyard’s revered ‘Uncle Ned’ also despised worldly power: ‘Let’s have no more dominant races, we don’t want them.’ Burne-Jones was profoundly distressed by the Jameson Raid (1895). And in his reaction to this brutal attempt at empire-building in South Africa, we do seem to hear the very accents of Teshoo Lama: ‘ours is a material empire... and no material empire can last forever.... I love the immaterial in English achievements.’<sup>28</sup> With his characteristic penetration, Chaudhuri, too, has detected beneath the Himalayan spirituality something ‘Christian’ in the Tibetan holy man.<sup>29</sup> As it turns out, the story told by the old monk may not be entirely Buddhist in origin.<sup>30</sup> Teshoo’s Jataka apparently derives some of its potent ecumenical appeal from a delightful allegory in a Western medieval bestiary. To this medieval picture-book Kipling



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was probably directed by yet another political dissident in the family circle, the Socialist William Morris. In the early nineties, Burne-Jones's great artistic collaborator, close friend (and not least, as 'Uncle Topsy', a memorable presence in young Rudyard's childhood) acquired a notable copy of just such an illuminated manuscript.<sup>31</sup> In *Physiologus* or the *Bestiary*, Christ is imaged as 'a very small elephant' who, after the rest of the herd have failed, succours an older elephant.<sup>32</sup> Religious syncretism of the kind detectable in Kipling's Jataka was much in vogue during the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Clearly Kipling was happy to acknowledge what his neo-traditional experiment owed to the significant form of the Jatakas.

Obviously as a child in a highly cultured and well-connected Victorian family he was steeped in the *Nights*. So precocious a reader was Kipling that by the time he got to Westward Ho he had read Fielding.<sup>34</sup> In his last years at school he fell under the spell of *The Light of Asia* (1879), Edwin Arnold's immensely popular account of the life and teaching of Gautama.<sup>35</sup> The time, location and often the persons concerned in their production meant Kipling could hardly escape the flood of art exhibits and publications dealing with Buddhism that swept through the decade or so prior to completion of *Kim* (1901).<sup>36</sup> Inevitably Morris got involved, publishing 'The Hystore of The Hermyte Barlaam' in the handsome Kelmscott Press edition of *The Golden Legend of Master William Caxton done anew* (1892).<sup>37</sup> In 1895, at Calcutta, Dr K. S. Macdonald included in his *Story of Barlaam and Joasaph* several English recensions, medieval as well as eighteenth-century versions, manuscripts and books; further, Macdonald's readers were reminded that over recent decades *Barlaam and Josaphat* had been discussed by a series of influential commentators: Matthew Arnold in *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1865); Max Muller in *The Contemporary Review* (July 1870); and at the end of the eighties, Joseph Jacobs in a remarkable clutch of scholarly investigations, e.g. *The Fables of Bidpai* (1888) and *Aesop* (1889). Then, in 1896, Jacobs brought out his *Barlaam and Josaphat*.<sup>38</sup> The educated nineties reader of Fielding would have had little excuse for mistaking Peter Pounce's reference to Jehosophat.

The trouble with these 'English Lives of the Buddha', as Jacobs's subtitle styles them, is that the Christianized versions of the Great Renunciation do not preserve the typical structure of the original Buddhist genre. That Kipling was well aware of the tripartite structure of the Buddhist genre is evident from private correspondence and journalism that he wrote during the long gestation of *Kim*: in a letter to

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one correspondent on 16 January 1895 he confesses that ‘the really fascinating tales are those that the Bodhisat tells of his previous incarnations ending always with the beautiful moral... I have “cribbed” freely from their tales’; to another correspondent on 30 November, ‘I want to do a tale in several parts’.<sup>39</sup> Among the accounts of his travels around the world that Kipling contributed to *The Times* in the early nineties, he drops other hints as to the sources of his information concerning the narrative form of the Jatakas.<sup>40</sup>

Yet another indication as to whence Kipling derived his knowledge of this genre is found in ‘The Wonder House’ depicted at the opening of *Kim* – the Lahore Museum of which Lockwood Kipling was curator: ‘slabs crowded with figures that had encrusted Buddhist stupas... Round [the Lord Buddha] an adoring hierarchy of kings, elders and old-time Buddhas’ (pp. 8–9). British expansion into Ceylon, the Himalayas, Burma and South-East Asia meant that the nineteenth-century colonial administrator, soldier, missionary, and even the ship’s officer trading with independent Siam, grew familiar with the popular stories, their representations in the holy places of Hindu and Buddhist, the commentaries of guides.<sup>41</sup> The majority of Victorians, nevertheless, became first acquainted with these intriguing fables, largely, through the medium of art. During the 1860s in the Crystal Palace were exhibited half a dozen full-scale reproductions of the Ajanta frescoes that illustrate Jatakas. In the late 1870s most of the bas-reliefs salvaged from Amaravati were shown in the India Museum, South Kensington. Then in 1880 these wonderful Amaravati sculptures were placed on the main staircase of the British Museum, where they received much attention, not least among readers in the library.<sup>42</sup>

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H. G. Wells, whose political fable *The Time Machine* (1895) reverses the temporal trajectory of the Jataka, recalls the British Museum Reading Room as a refuge during the late 1880s. In 1895 as the guest of Richard Garnett, Keeper of Printed Books, Conrad was a visitor spending a night on the premises of the British Museum, ‘alongside fellows who have slept for 2000 years or so’.<sup>43</sup> And even supposing that the Amaravati exhibition on the grand staircase failed to arouse the curiosity of Wells and Conrad, there were additionally any number of monographs on Buddhist art handsomely illustrated, and some several times