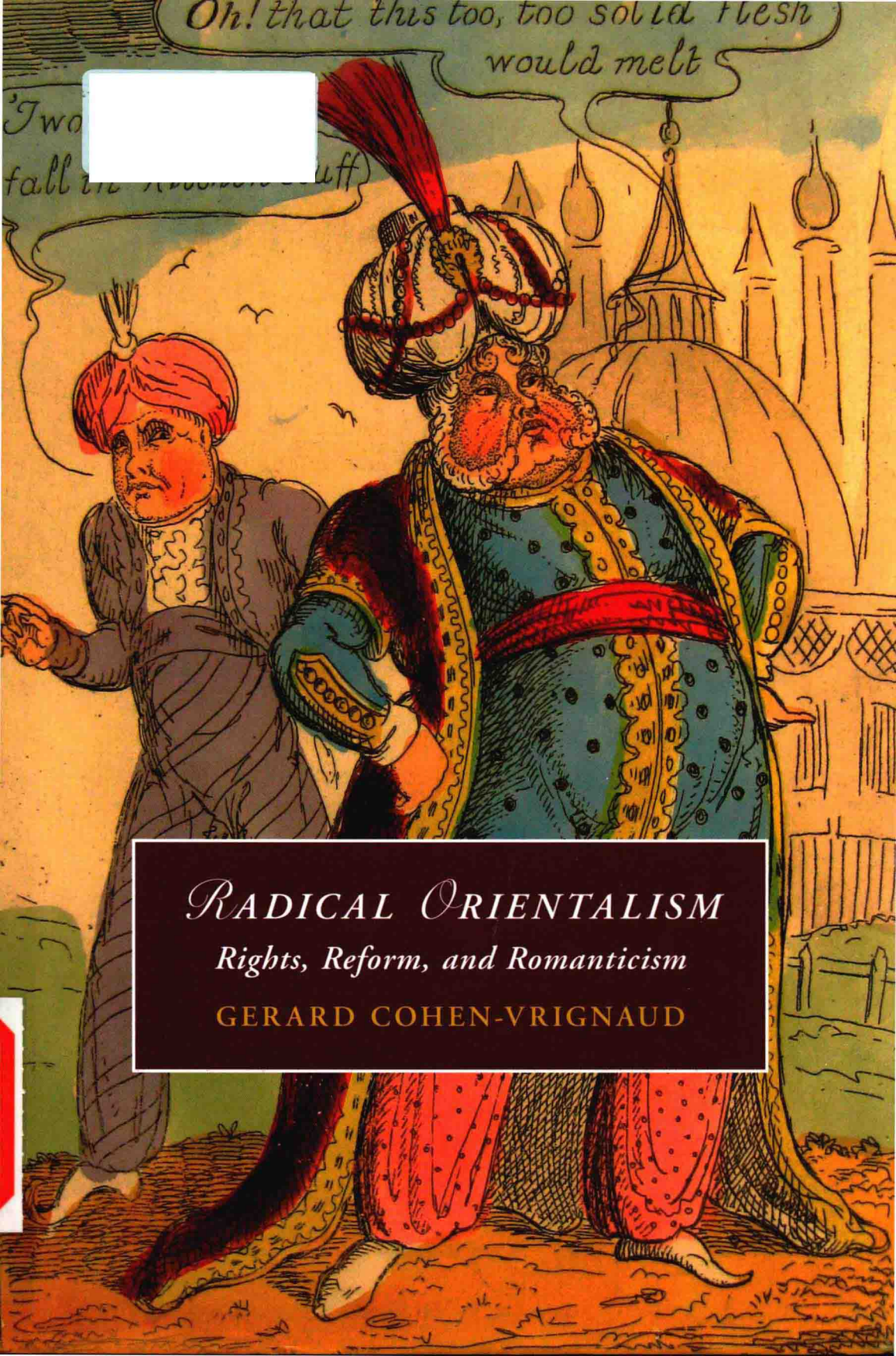

RADICAL ORIENTALISM

Rights, Reform, and Romanticism

GERARD COHEN-VRIGNAUD

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107110328

First published 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-11032-8 Hardback

RADICAL ORIENTALISM

This fascinating study reveals the extent to which the Orientalism of Byron and the Shelleys resonated with the reformist movement of the Romantic era. It documents how and why radicals such as Bentham, Cobbett, Carlile, Hone, and Wooler, among others in post-revolutionary Britain, invoked Turkey, North Africa, and Mughal India when attacking and seeking to change their government's domestic policies. Examining a broad archive ranging from satires, journalism, tracts, political and economic treatises, and public speeches to the exotic poetry and fictions of canonical Romanticism, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud shows that promoting colonization was not Orientalism's sole ideological function. Equally vital was its aesthetic and rhetorical capacity to alienate the people's affection from their rulers and fuel popular opposition to regressive taxation, penal cruelty, police repression, and sexual regulation.

GERARD COHEN-VRIGNAUD is Assistant Professor of English at The University of Tennessee. He has published articles in *English Literary History*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Studies in Romanticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *Dickens Studies Annual*, and *differences*.

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Acknowledgments

The jacket may grant me top billing, but many kind, supporting players had a hand in bringing this book to print. Foremost were the faculty who helmed the original production: Jim Chandler, a model of scholarly acumen and grace; the inimitable Françoise Meltzer; and Lauren Berlant, whose passions remain inspiring. Also encouraging me in those heady days were Sandra Macpherson and Josh Scodel, ever sardonic. I am grateful for graduate funding received from the Foreign Language and Area Studies program, James C. Hormel and the Center for Gender Studies, and the Mellon Foundation. A debt of longer standing is owed to my undergraduate professors, the agent provocateur David Caron, Ross Chambers, and Marjorie Levinson, a dazzling exegete on the page and in person.

Since coming to the University of Tennessee, I have been sustained by a convivial department ably headed by Chuck Maland and Stan Garner. I am deeply thankful for my marvelous mentor Nancy Henry, who has been unfailingly generous with her time and sage advice. I am also much obliged to Amy Billone, Nancy Moore Goslee, and merry Misty Anderson for their collegiality and responses to my writing. Other coworkers who nurtured me as a tenure-track chickling include Katy Chiles, Michelle Commander, Margaret Lazarus Dean, Allen Dunn, Martin Griffin, Marilyn Kallet, Ben Lee, Lisi Schoenbach, and Urmila Seshagiri. Research in the latter stages was significantly advanced by grants from our department's Hodges Fund, which allowed me to rifle through the British and Huntington Libraries. My work has also been enriched by discussions with Mark Canuel, Elizabeth Eger, Andrew Elfenbein, Humberto Garcia, Andrea Haslanger, John Havard, Saree Makdisi, Anahid Nersessian, Vivasvan Soni, Daniel White, and especially Kevin Gilmartin.

Along the often solitary path of academic research, there has fortunately been solidarity as well. Among the doctoral comrades who shared in the joys and terrors of being molded were Kathleen Frederickson, Natalie Slopen, Liz Hoffman, Marta Napiorkowska, Scott Richmond, Christie Davis, and

my partner in hyphenation Tim Stewart-Winter. Longtime friends not in the business have been wonderful too, including Angela Shoosmith, Eve Chalom, Masha Viches, Padraig Johnston, and Christin Wade. Since landing in Knoxville, I have treasured my happy-hour and after-hours conversations with Joe Miles, Jess Hay, and my hiking confederate Erin Whiteside. My Dickens Universe buddies know how much their mutual friendship these past four years has meant to me. Although late on the scene of this book's composition, Ren Delmar was a tender and loving presence as it evolved. Susan Cohen has regaled me with food and affection through the years and both I and my taste buds are the better for it. Finally, none of my endeavors would have been imaginable without the indomitable woman who brought me into being and believed unerringly in my specialness, even when I was most in doubt. To Jacki Cohen, I dedicate this book with love and gratitude.

Portions of Chapters 3 and 4 appear in "Capitalism's Wishful Thinking," *Modern Language Quarterly* 76 (June 2015). Select paragraphs and images from Chapter 1 are included in "Becoming Corsairs: Byron, British Property Rights and Orientalist Economics," *Studies in Romanticism* 50 (Winter 2011) and "Beyond the Pale: *Edwin Drood* and the 'Sanctity of Human Life,'" *Dickens Studies Annual* 46 (2015). My article "Byron and Oriental Love," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68 (June 2013) incorporates about a third of Chapter 5. I also wish to acknowledge the uncommonly liberal policies of the Huntington Library and Yale University regarding image reproduction and permissions.

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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