

In her ground-breaking study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Marie Louse Pratt claims that <<Romanticism consists, among other things, of shifts in relation between Europe and other parts of the world [...] – one might be tempted to argue that Romanticism originated in the contact zones of America, North Africa and the south seas>> [PRATT 1992, p. 135]. The present issue of *La questione Romantica* endorses this claim, yet, at the same time, intends to adjust it by adding a fourth geographical area to the map drawn by Pratt: the Orient, or the Middle and Far East, whose multi-faceted relationships with the West (more specifically Britain) provides one of the most important and fertile sources of transits, exchanges and cross-fertilization in Romantic-period literature and culture.

After the loss in 1783 of part of the <<first British empire>>, to borrow Vincent T. Harlow's definition [HARLOW 1952], established in the seventeenth century and consisting in the colonies of America and the West Indies, Britain embarked on the creation of the <<second British empire>> through the so-called <<Swing to the East>> [HOVELER AND CASS 2006, p. 1], that is, to India and the Asian colonies. The British East India Company itself had been, of course, founded much earlier than the loss of the American colonies, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. However, it was only from the 1773 East India Act – initiating a restructuring of the Company through a series of reforms meant to justify the missionary role of British administration against native rulers tyrannizing over an allegedly under-developed population – that <<what began as a corporate enterprise soon evolved into a massively armed colonial empire>> [HARLOW AND CARTER 1999, p. 4].

In the Romantic period, some eighteenth-century works in particular had a strong impact on the contemporary reception and ideas of the East, such as the translations of the *One Thousand and One Nights* (1704-17) and the Koran (1734), respectively by Antoine Galland and George Sale, the *Turkish Letters* (1763) by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the English ambassador in Constantinople, and the essays about Eastern culture and literature written by William Jones, the Orientalist philologist who founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784. There were, of course, also previous sources the Romantics could glean from, since the history of the commercial and political interactions between East and West dates back to the sixteenth century, when travellers, explorers, merchants and diplomats experienced the Orient and, through their accounts, contributed to the creation of the Oriental imaginary, including the myth of *Mirabiliae Indiae*.

As Huang has pointed out, from the beginning, the development of such transnational networks between the Occident and the Orient was a contested process characterized by <<unbalanced power relations between Eastern and Western countries>> [HUANG 2011, p. 1]. In most cases, such relations sanctioned the cultural superiority of the latter on the former, on the basis of misconceptions which, from the Middle Ages onwards, have fomented extreme responses on both sides – from the fear of the Other to the culture of terror. The critic Mohammed Sharafuddin goes so far as to argue that <<ever since the encounter between the Greeks and the Persians in the fifth century BC, the East has always been represented by the West in hostile terms>> [SHARAFUDDIN 1994, p. xiii], namely as a place of backwardness, despotism and incivility. It is, for example, well known that Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 was masked as a mission meant to save that country from barbarism. On the other hand, as Huang has observed,

the reception, possession and consumption of imported objects, resulting from either foreign trade, political affairs, religious transmission or archaeological excavations, not only shaped one's understanding and conception of the Cultural Other, but also offered each other an opportunity to embrace alternative modes of being and behaviours and to transcend the boundaries of native and foreign, of reality and fantasy [HUANG 2011, p. 2].

Underlying all these complex West-East encounters is a central discourse and mentality of <<us versus them>>, which in Romantic-era literature and culture is often problematized by the experience and

representation of a much more complex global perspective, so that the figurations of the Orient in Romantic works never constitute a fixed and invariable set of values and meanings. In Sharafuddin's words, not <<all western writers [...] were the inevitable product of their age's imperialist and political ideologies>>. In fact, <<the Romantic movement emerged as resistance to massive despotism, [...] its writers were reacting against political and cultural centralization. It was possible for a genuine interest in other countries and cultures to develop>> [SHARAFUDDIN 1994, p. xvii]. In much the same way, Asian people could admire Western science, art and literature. It is also true, however, that a genuine interest might at times be combined with an uneasy approach to, and reception of, the cultural imports deriving from the peripheries of the empire.

Nigel Leask has shown, for instance, how the apparently contradictory and oxymoronic visions of the East emerging in several Romantic-period writings – Landor's *Gebir* (1798), Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), Byron's *Eastern Tales* (1813-1816), Shelley's *Alastor* (1816) and *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), to mention just a few – derive from the authors' <<anxieties of empire>> and their torn, often critical, engagement with both imperial ideology and the Western appropriation of Oriental cultures. In these works, in the words of Leask,

The ontology of the oriental image is never stable; it is at once desired as a heraldic device, but at the same time always tends to shift its meaning from an emblem of symbolic incorporation to one of parasitic nature. [...] Hopes about the invigorating effects of imperial expansion on the metropolitan society turn into a nightmare realization that it had become economically dependent on (or addicted to) its subjugated Other; the relations of power have been grotesquely reversed [LEASK 1992, p. 9].

By challenging essentialist hierarchical polarisations between West and East, Self and Other, these Romantic writings, in other words, allow us to see the relation between the West's reception of the East and the history of colonial and imperial conquest as too complex to be encompassed by the <<closed system>> of power relations theorized by Edward Said in his cutting-edge 1978 study on *Orientalism* [SAID 1978, p. 70]. As is well known, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said himself moved beyond his initial argument by endorsing an idea of cultural hybridity which partly overcomes Self-vs-Other dichotomic discourses. Thus, his definition of Orientalism as <<a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient>> [p.3], though often regarded as superseded now, nevertheless still seems to be an unavoidable benchmark in critical theory with which any study about West-East relations and interchanges must somehow engage or take issue [VARISCO 2007, p. xi].

One cannot indeed deny that *Orientalism* led academics around the world to re-think and often re-shape their scholarly research on the Arabic world specifically, but also, more generally, on all Eastern cultures. Apart from the authors of the above-mentioned reference books, other scholars, often drawing on postcolonial theories, have examined the cultural and literary exchanges between Orient and Occident, and, in most cases, Said's argument is explicitly or implicitly referred to, taken into account or problematized. Relevant examples for the present issue of *La questione Romantica* are, *inter alia*: Saree Makdisi's *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (1998) and his later article <<Worldly Romanticism>> (2011); Alan Bewell's *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (1999); Rajani Sudan's *Fair Exotics: Xenophobic Subjects in English Literature, 1720-1850* (2002); Michael Wiley's *Romantic Migrations: Local, National, and Transnational Dispositions* (2008); Wael B. Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (2008); Tara Ghoshal Wallace, *Imperial Characters: Home and Periphery in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2010); James Mulholland, *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire, 1730-1820* (2013); and François Pouillon, Jean-Claud Vatin, eds, *After Orientalism: Critical*

*Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-Appropriations* (2014). These studies, in different ways, challenge the idea of Oriental subservience to Western domination, while encouraging a reading of West-East encounters that goes beyond restrictive paradigms of confrontation and essentialist dichotomies. As has been pointed out, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century British travellers to the East (such as Lady Montagu and Byron, among others) were neither simply motivated by a desire for adventure nor eager to appropriate and control the Oriental Other from a Western perspective. On the contrary, aware that they were dealing with cultures that had their own long history and traditions, they <<were doing something much more interesting and complex: they were hybridizing [...] and modernizing>> [HOEVELER AND CASS 2006, p. 2].

Preconceived assumptions about the inferiority of the East versus the superiority of the West were hard to dismantle, so they may permeate even Romantic-period writings about the East whose authors seemingly advocated transcultural interconnections. At the same time, however, they provide significant examples of what the critic Homi Bhabha has defined as the <<liminal space, in-between the [binary] designations of identity>>, an <<interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy>> [BHABHA 1994, p.4]. By the same token, many of these writings show how their authors, more than a century before the term *globalization* was coined, were perfectly aware of the *global* networks (cultural, not just commercial) which were radically changing people's lives on all levels – individual, national and worldwide. Many of these writers, the critic Evan Gottlieb contends, <<wrote texts that not only encouraged readers to think globally, but also strove [...] to explore the ethical imperatives of such thinking>> [GOTTLIB 2014, pp. 2-3], in a period in which British people could not avoid facing, with a mixture of curiosity and fear, the consequences and effects of their coming into contact with different cultures, societies, religious creeds and languages. After all, not only Britain, but Europe as a whole, as James Clifford has argued, has been <<constantly remade, and traversed, by influences beyond its borders>> [CLIFFORD, 1997, p.3]

Like some of the aforesaid studies, the articles included in this issue of *La questione Romantica* intend to present new reflections about West-East cross-pollination and interchangeability. They offer a wide range of interpretations that, on the one hand, contribute to enriching the already ample critical panorama of the literary and cultural relations between West and East during the Romantic age, while, on the other hand, suggesting new ways of situating research on cultural and literary transferences in the Romantic period.

Starting from Elena Spandri's <<The Politics of Sympathy in the Anglo-Indian Romantic Discourse on Religion>>, the topics debated in this collection are still controversial today. Spandri's essay, for example, tackles one of the most problematic aspects of Western colonialism, namely evangelization. The author highlights how Orientalist and missionary writings employed discourses that resorted to sympathetic imagination as a means of paving the way to preaching Christianity in India. However, in the works of the Orientalists of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, sympathy, while acting as a practice of colonial interaction, also functioned as an effective system of communication that endeavoured to loosen, if not overcome, cultural differences. Thus, the use of sympathy inevitably complicated the symbolic allegations that underscored religious propaganda and the ideological negotiation it implied.

Gioia Angeletti's <<A Scottish Migrant in India: John Leyden, Between Enlightenment and Orientalism>> also examines an unusual and challenges aspect of the cultural and ideological transaction between the West and the East. Angeletti focuses her analysis on the Scottish Orientalist John Leyden, whose national background complicates the picture, since, as Angeletti argues, Scotland's involvement within the British Empire has not been fully assessed yet. Likewise, the role played by Leyden in the British colonialist politics of the time raises questions to be further considered. His national identity, together with his cultural background, made Leyden's an unconventional voice within the empire. The principles of the

Scottish Enlightenment that he endorsed, and his own affiliation to Adam Smith's historiography and language theories, inform his writings and shape in many ways his own experience of Indian otherness. His various engagements with British colonial administration made him a constituent component of the British empire. However, his accepting to be part of it – and thereby his complicity – was not without problems: on the contrary, as Angeletti's essay demonstrates, Leyden manifests a complex and contradictory relationship with British Orientalist ideology.

Ambiguities, conflicts and acquiescence are also some of the key concepts developed in the essays <<Gender and Orientalism in Women Romantic Playwrights>> by Lilla Maria Crisafulli and >>The Rights of Woman and the Wrongs of the East: Orientalism, Romantic Era Feminism, and Mariana Starke's *The Widow of Malabar*>> by Greg Kucich. Both essays deal with some of the main women writers of the Romantic era, and the shaping of Orientalist discourses in some of their works.

Crisafulli's essay mainly discusses women's theatre and drama, examining the critical views that playwrights such as Elizabeth Inchbald, Hannah Cowley and Mariana Starke express on the gender relations of their time. These writers contributed and responded to the Orientalist discourse that was under construction in various ways, both projecting their own female image onto the Oriental stage, to the point of identifying with the colonized subjects (especially women), and, at the same time, distancing themselves from the Oriental world by embracing the Western imperialist perception of the East. Kucich's essay addresses what is seen as a major challenge in Romantic-era proto-feminist writing, i.e., the political conflict that lies between campaigning for the global rights of women, while, at the same time, demeaning the backwardness of Eastern societies. Kucich, in particular, focuses on Mariana Starke's *The Widow of Malabar*, a drama that, according to him, displays <<the Orientalist assault on Indian culture and pushes beyond that bias through a feminist cosmopolitanism that assails forms of global patriarchy.>>

A contribution to gender studies is also Elisabetta Marino's essay <<Trifling Account of the Women of Egypt, Nubia and Syria di Sarah Belzoni: uno studio sulla condizione femminile>>. It deals with a little-known travelogue written by Sarah Belzoni, wife of Giovanni Battista Belzoni, one of the pioneers of modern archaeology. Between 1815 and 1819, she accompanied her husband on his expedition to Egypt and Nubia, and, afterwards, continued her journey on her own to the Holy Land. The result of her stay was her <<Trifling Account>>, which, once again, while fostering a new and more dynamic ideal of womanhood, quite openly supports the British expansionist cause.

In her article <<Colonial Picturesque and Indian Women in Letitia Elizabeth Landon's Oriental Poems>>, Serena Baiesi also concentrates on a woman writer. She investigates the poems by Letitia Elizabeth Landon that portray Oriental environments, such as the zenana or the harem, in terms of the picturesque. Once again, Landon's Orientalism, like that of many other British women writers collected in this volume, is dual: it aims to debate women's subaltern condition in British society, while, at the same time, it shows obedience to imperialist ideology and rules. Landon wears the mask of the Oriental woman who is enclosed in the harem. She adopts the role of the subjected Other in order to give voice to her own quest for identity and fulfilment, but, in so doing, she also calls for collective female rights.

The final essay in this collection offers a different, though not less challenging, perspective on Romantic Orientalism. <<Blending Orientalism and Romanticism: Keats's Talismanic Lady in D. G. Rossetti and William Morris>>, by Eleonora Sasso, bridges Romantic and Victorian poetry by exploring the fascination exercised by the *Arabian Nights* on nineteenth-century British poets. Sasso reads D. G. Rossetti's poems and works of art, as well as Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, as being imbued not only with the atmosphere of the *Arabian Nights* but also with Keats's Oriental Romanticism, as envisioned in poems such as <<La Belle Dame Sans Merci>>. Hence, the magic and the sensuality that Keats's poem figures are re-worked in Rossetti's and Morris's Pre-Raphaelite Orientalism in a way that recalls what Edward Said terms <<the eminently corporeal>> [SAID 1978, p. 184].

In conclusion, the essays collected in this special issue demonstrate how Orientalism is still an open question, and how confrontations and conflicts, interactions and the contradictions characterised Romantic literature and culture, especially when the West encountered the East.

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