

# The Romantics And The Myth Of The Islamic Orient

The Romantics, a literary and artistic movement that emerged in the late 18th century, sought to embrace the beauty of nature, the imagination, and the exotic. One of the most enduring themes found in their works is the fascination with the Myth of the Islamic Orient. This article dives deep into the Romantics' infatuation with this mythical realm, exploring the reasons behind it and its impact on their artistic expressions.

## Understanding the Myth of the Islamic Orient

The Islamic Orient, also known as the "Orient," "Oriental," or "East," refers to the cultural, geographical, and historical region encompassing countries in Asia and North Africa. Throughout history, writers, artists, and scholars from Western societies have constructed a romanticized and idealized image of the Orient, often perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions.

The Romantic era coincided with the expansion of European colonialism and the subsequent encounters with the East. The Orient was largely unfamiliar to many in the Western world, which added to its allure. It became a symbol of everything that was exotic, mysterious, and spiritually captivating. The Romantics were drawn to this image of the Orient, and their works reflect this fascination.

### **Ottomania: The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient** by Roderick Cavaliero(Kindle Edition)

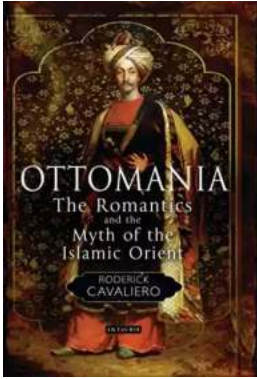
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## The Influence of Orientalism on the Romantics

Orientalism, a term coined by the critic Edward Said, refers to the academic and artistic study of the Orient and the way it is portrayed by the West. The Romantic artists and writers, influenced by the Orientalist discourse of their time, created an idealized view of the Orient through their works. They often depicted the Orient as a place of sensuality, mystery, and spirituality, using it as a backdrop for their narratives.

Through their writings, the Romantics crafted a world of fantastical tales, capturing the imagination of their readers. They described lush landscapes, vibrant bazaars, and opulent palaces, while also presenting the people of the Orient as noble savages or exotic temptresses. These depictions were based on their own fantasies, as most of them had never set foot in the East.

## Exploring Oriental Themes in Romantic Literature

Some of the most prominent Romantic writers who incorporated Oriental themes into their works include Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Coleridge, in his poem "Kubla Khan," presents a mythical vision of a pleasure dome in Xanadu, tapping into the exoticism associated with the Orient.

Lord Byron, known for his adventurous spirit, often drew inspiration from his travels in the East. His narrative poem "The Giaour" explores the themes of forbidden love and revenge in an Ottoman setting, capitalizing on the fascination with Orient's dark and mysterious nature.

Shelley, in his poem "Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude," reflects the Romantics' interest in spiritual and transcendental experiences. The narrative follows the protagonist's search for an idealized, mystical being in an Oriental setting, illustrating the Romantics' preoccupation with the divine and unknown.

## **The Legacy of Orientalism in Art**

The Romantics' infatuation with the Oriental myth left a lasting impact on the world of art and literature. Many subsequent artists, including the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, sought inspiration from the Romantic depictions of the East, perpetuating Orientalist themes in their works.

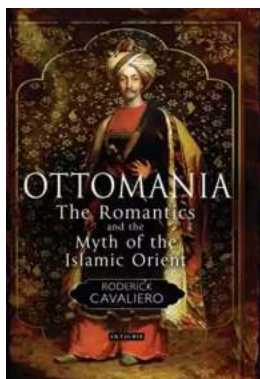
The Orientalist movement in art continued well into the 19th and early 20th centuries. Artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix created stunning and evocative paintings depicting scenes from the Orient, further fueling the Western imagination's fascination with this mythical realm.

## **Challenging the Romantic Oriental Fantasy**

While the Romantics' exploration of the Orient undoubtedly contributed to the evolution of literary and artistic movements, it is essential to approach their works with a critical eye. The Romantic artists often exoticized and stereotyped the Orient, contributing to the perpetuation of an Orientalist discourse that can be problematic.

Modern scholars and critics have shed light on the Orientalist tendencies within Romantic works, urging readers to address the complexity and the power imbalances inherent in the portrayal of the East by Western artists. By critically engaging with the Romantic Oriental fantasy, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of its impact and significance in the context of art history.

The Romantics' fascination with the Myth of the Islamic Orient added a layer of enchantment and exoticism to their literary and artistic creations. Their depictions of the East, although based on fantasies and stereotypes, continue to captivate audiences to this day. It is crucial, however, to critically examine these works and acknowledge their contribution to the Orientalist discourse. By doing so, we can appreciate the Romantics' creative choices while also recognizing the potential limitations and cultural biases embedded within their representations.



## Ottomania: The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient by Roderick Cavaliero(Kindle Edition)

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'Romanticism had its roots in fantasy and fed on myth'. So Roderick Cavaliero introduces the European Romantic obsession with the Orient. Cavaliero draws on a life-time's research in Romantic literature and introduces a rich cast of leading Romantic writers, artists, musicians and travellers, including Beckford, Byron,

Shelley, Walter Scott, Pierre Loti, Thomas Moore, Rossini, Eugene Delacroix, Thackeray and Disraeli, and a host of other Romantics, who were drawn to the Orient in the 18th and 19th centuries. They luxuriate in its exotic sights, sounds, literature and, above all, in the prevailing mythology. Cavaliero analyses the Romantic vision where, as Byron writes, there are 'virgins soft as the roses they twine', but lays bare an underlying vision of cruelty and oppression, and of societies based on domestic or prisoner slavery - anathema to the 19th-century Romantic.

The overarching myth was that of the Ottoman Empire, a huge and exotic superpower, an empire to rival Rome, a major threat to Europe, with an invincible military record ruled by a Sultan with absolute, even feckless, power of life and death over his subjects who lived to 'delight his senses'. But to the Romantics, fear of the absolute ruler was overlaid by frissons of oriental luxury. Thus the Ottoman Sultans were the heirs of the iconic Caliphate of Harun ar Rashid in the fabulous Arabian Nights Entertainments. Coleridge's dream of the Orient in Kubla Khan was not of the barbaric grandeur of the global Mongol empire but that of a 'stately pleasure dome in Xanadu' among incense-bearing trees and untroubled forests. Moore's Lalla Rookh was set in his visionary vale of Kashmir and is a love story in 'a land of kingfishers and golden orioles' with the backdrop of the mighty Moghul Empire. Scott was obsessed by the chivalry of the Crusades on both sides and Disraeli was fascinated by the interplay of the Abrahamic faiths and the hopes of peace in the Holy Land. Dualism runs through Romantic writing even when European realpolitik and modern nationalism are involved - as in the Greek revolt against Ottoman rule and the decline of Turkey as a great power. But above all for the Romantics the Orient remained mysterious and inviting.

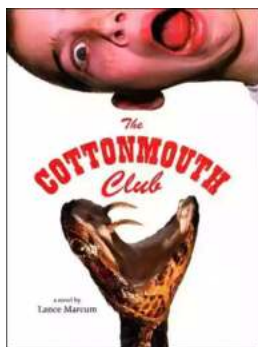
Cavaliero's Ottomania will delight all readers interested in tales of the exotic Orient, and the literature of the Romantic movement - a rich treasure-house of

poets, novelists and travellers.



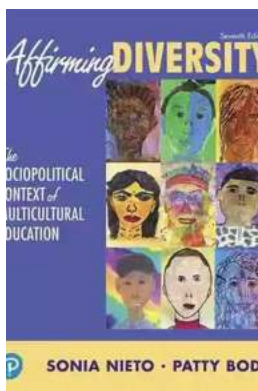
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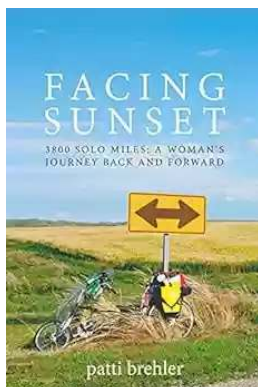
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