

Oriental Renaissance or Orientalism?

- The (first) Renaissance was triggered by the rediscovery of the Greek classics transmitted to Europe by Arab scholars.
- There is evidence of Oriental (Buddhist) influence on the European, particularly Scottish Enlightenment thought (Humean skepticism).
- The advent of Romanticism coincides with the rise of Orientalism and gives birth to a complex and powerful aesthetic movement that reformulates the limits of the European imagination, taking it to the frontier where the unconscious and even the monstrous claims the title of the natural.
- Oriental Renaissance or Orientalism?

Key Texts

Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, 1950

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 1971

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

Krishnaswamy, "Nineteenth-Century Language Ideology," 2005

Key Concepts

Imaginative Geography:	Islamic Orient	(middle east)
	Indian Orient	(east)
	Chinese Orient	(far east)
The meaning of Orient:	antiquity, origin, foreign, strange, other, exotic, mystery, mystic, spiritual, wisdom, romance, primitive, savage, monstrous, grotesque, awesome, terror, sublime, sensual, erotic, emotional, irrational, feminine...	

Romantic Orientalism

The term "Romantic Orientalism" is often used to refer to the "recurrence of recognizable elements of Asian and African place names, historical and legendary people, religion, philosophies, art, architecture, interior decoration, costume and the like" in Romantic literature (Norton Anthology of English Literature). This is, however, a somewhat partial and superficial definition.

The Oriental Renaissance begins with the discovery of Sanskrit, “the America of languages,” in the late 18th-early 19th century (Schwab). It gives birth to Comparative Philology, the pre-eminent “science” of the 19th century, and the precursor of modern linguistics. The legacy of Comparative Philology:

- **Historical linguistics:** (proto-) Indo-European placed at the origin and apex of the global linguistic hierarchy.
- **Ethnographic linguistics:** language connected to *volk*, and “Aryan” (Indo-European) placed at the apex of the ethnographic hierarchy of mankind (identification of a language with a people and diagnosis of peoplehood by criterion of language; main theorists: Herder and Schlegel in Germany; Coleridge in Britain)
- **Language theory and poetics:** influence of Sanskrit promoted organic theories of language (Romantic ideas about language as spontaneous expression or overflow, the divine or natural innateness of language and meaning etc. challenged Lockean materialism and skepticism; Herder’s notion of “primitive poetry”; Coleridge & Wordsworth – Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*, *Biographia Literaria*)

British Orientalism

Orientalism in British Romantic literature can be traced back to the first decade of the eighteenth century, with the earliest translations of *The Arabian Nights* into English (from the French, 1705–08). Influenced by the ancient Indian tales that circulated along the ancient Silk Road (*The Panchatantra* and *The Jataka Tales*), *The Arabian Nights* had a huge impact on the development of European narratives, including *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The popularity of *The Arabian Nights* inspired European writers to develop a new genre, the Oriental Tale (Samuel Johnson’s *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759); Byron’s *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, and *The Bride of Abydos*)

Like Gothic novels and plays, many Oriental Tales feature exotic settings, supernatural happenings, extravagant events, characters, behavior, emotion, and speech. Gothicism and Orientalism offer escape from everyday reality into fantasy but they also force confrontation with the alien (the non-human as other) and the foreign (the other as non-human – eg. *Frankenstein*). Pleasurable terror and terrifying exoticism are kindred experiences, with unreality and strangeness at the root of both.

The Orientalist Gothic tale is a (pre-Freudian) attempt to map the unconscious and the Orient/non-West (the unconscious as the Orient, the Orient as the unconscious; in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a fine example of Imperial Gothic fiction, it is Africa instead of the Orient that represents the unconscious); as such the Oriental Gothic tale contributes significantly to the development of the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime.

Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*

- Orient as setting: Xanadu, pleasure dome, garden (exotic, lush, primitive, foreign, other, sublime)
- Orient as characters: KK (oriental despotism; extravagant, spectacular); dulcimer damsel (romance, erotic)
- Orient as form: opiate dream, fragmented form, irregular stanzas, rich sound effects

The role of India/Sanskrit/Kalidasa & Romanticism

Kalidasa: 4th century Classical Sanskrit dramatist. Best known work *Shakuntala*. Love story between a king and forest maiden named Shakuntala. Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* is a romanticized/eroticized version of a more hardy, sensible, and assertive original who appears in the ancient epic *Mahabharata*. Over 50 translations in nearly 12 European languages published in Europe during the 19th c.

1789: William Jones, the British Orientalist founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal credited for "discovering" Sanskrit and established its filial relationship to Greek, Latin, & Persian, translated *Shakuntala* into Latin and then into English ("Sacontala or the Fatal Ring"). Jones censors erotic parts of Kalidasa's play, misses puns, irony, humor; presents Shakuntala as an exotic but simple "rustic girl."

1791: Georg Forster's translation of Jones's English translation into German had a huge impact on German Orientalism.

- Herder used *Shakuntala* to challenge Aristotelian and neo-classical aesthetics (based on notions of order, hierarchy, structure), arguing that Kalidasa's play is organic, and dwells beyond history in timeless antiquity/eternity.
- Goethe penned ecstatic verses on *Shakuntala*; used Kalidasa's prologue convention as model for his own in *Faust*; selectively appropriates Sanskrit aesthetics of *rasadhvani* and conventions of romantic love.
- F. Schlegel claimed *Shakuntala* was the purest expression of the golden-age of human innocence which classical India represented.

German Romantics turned *Shakuntala* into a Romantic archetype ("child of Nature"; flower unfolding its innocence in the forest; compare to Noble Savage of the New World) and an icon of Oriental femininity; classical India became the origin of natural wisdom, moral striving, intense imagination, and ecstatic spiritualism.

Despite implicit strains of Orientalism, the Oriental Renaissance placed the classical Orient alongside the classical West.

But enthusiasm for Romantic classical India waned quickly in Britain as British Orientalists (nerdy scholars like Jones) lost ground to hard-nosed Anglicists (imperial bureaucrats like Macaulay). 1835: T.B. Macaulay introduces English education in India, officially declaring the superiority of the English language, literature, culture, science and civilization.

The Romantic Orient was absorbed into American transcendentalism; example: Walt Whitman's "Passage to India." This strand persists in American pop culture, surfacing in 60s hippie counter-culture and New-Age stuff (Buddhism, yoga, meditation, incense sticks, Dalai Lama, Deepak Chopra). High Modernism also turned to the classical Orient to seek solutions to the West's ills (Eliot, Pound).