

Roderick Cavaliero

Ottomania: The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient

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Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* modern scholarship has developed an ever-intensifying awareness toward Eurocentric notions that have been long imbedded in the Western narrations of the East, or *Orient*. Though one may still frequently come across intentional or unintentional *orientalisms* in the American (and, in general, Western) media and popular culture, most specialists of area studies such as Near Eastern or Asian Studies have now become more perceptive and insightful, and try to avoid all forms of Eurocentrism in their research, at least in theoretical level. As a recently growing field, global history, for instance, prioritizes inter-civilizational historical comparisons from a new unbiased perspective. In the last decade or two, global historians have revised some of the generally accepted historical arguments on the political, economic, and cultural backwardness of the non-Western world. Studies on the Ottoman Empire have also benefited from this trend, and it is now common knowledge that the so-called backwardness of the non-Western world was reverberation of the myths that the book under review here examines.

Within this regard, Roderick Cavaliero breaks no new ground, but makes some wise remarks on some of the well-known issues. The sources he analyzes are the writings of eighteenth and nineteenth century European authors, travelers, diplomats and adventurers, some of whom had never been to the Orient, and almost all of whose thinking about the east was typically given shape by an imaginative romanticism. In the preface and the first chapter, he traces the earliest creation of the myths back to Lepanto and the 1570s, when the once formidable and terrible Ottoman forces took their first major defeat by the Europeans. From then on, as the defeats the Europeans inflicted upon the Ottoman armies grew in size and number, the mighty Ottoman image in European eyes would gradually be replaced by one that is first disdained, and then ridiculed. Though not new in content, the rest of Cavaliero's narration illustrates successfully how the Romantics textually reconstructed the various geographical and cultural domains of the Ottoman world which would then serve as the antithesis of Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe. The second and third chapters survey the images of the most misinterpreted individual and institution by the Europeans: the Ottoman Sultan and Harem. For Europeans, the former was capricious and unpredictable, whose ruling style was for long defined as 'oriental despotism' by the modern scholarship, while the latter "spelled sexual slavery and intimidation" (p. 39). It is difficult to dispute Cavaliero's statement that the concept of Harem has thus become "a major obstacle to East-West understanding" (p. 34). In an intelligent remark, Cavaliero reminds that the Harem within the Sultan's court was needed to avoid childlessness and inheritance crisis. In addition, harems of the wealthy individuals had a contemporary and contextual logic in a society characterized by love of offspring where women feared not being married, and indeed, even women of lower status who lived in a segregated *haremlik* enjoyed their lives as much as the wealthy. Cavaliero notes often that this was what Lady Montagu and Pierre Loti observed, at two distant times. Another undisputable remark is that *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, the major source of the myths about oriental exoticism and eroticism, is "the oriental fantasy *par excellence*" (p. 40). The author states that the stories of captivity in the East would always be ornamented with barbarity "to keep public interest alive" (p. 73), or with homosexuality, purportedly a "universal practice in Arab and Ottoman lands" (p. 77). There is no doubt that Lord Byron was writing with the same motives



when he introduced the East as “where the virgins are soft as roses they twine.” In chapters seven through ten, Cavaliero successfully depicts the gradual transformation in the attitude of the Europeans from this imaginative and fictitious otherization of the East to a domineering feel of contempt. In accordance, while Napoleon Bonaparte was landing at Alexandria with an army of scientists to become the master of the Orient in the fashion of Alexander of Macedon, Greek revolution would be glorified by Delacroix in his paintings. Likewise, Persia, which couldn’t escape mythical imaginations in Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh*, was believed to be an unexplored equivalent of the Ottoman Empire and no more than a potential buffer against the Russian threat.

The declinist arguments about the Ottoman Empire, for long discredited by the Ottomanists, were inspired largely from the sources Cavaliero unmasks. Within this framework, it is significant that the author presents one of the few collective surveys of the orientalist European literature from 1700 to 1900, but it could have been strengthened by mentioning the current directions within the Ottoman historiography. Although the bibliography contains several scholarly titles, there are only a few references to them. In terms of fluidity, chapter fourteen, which provides an insight into the new, “amiable” and “less tyrant, more pantaloons” (p. 187) image of the Turk in the late nineteenth century, is ineffectually separated from his conclusion in chapter fifteen, because that new image had emerged as “geopolitical priorities replaced questions of faith and liberty,” which is discussed in the penultimate chapter, not fourteenth. The book contains several flaws, mostly minor details, concerning also language usage. Firstly, it should be the ‘People’ of the Book, not “communities” (p. 4). The author prefers “Mahomet,” the older Latin transliteration, to more proper *Mohamed*, *Muhammed*, or *Muhammad*, probably because of stylistic reasons. In few places where he refers to the prophet, he takes advantage of the book’s literary rhetoric to add “peace be upon him,” which would be normally regarded as unscholarly. A factual error is that the abolishment of the Janissary corps did not take place in 1808 (p. 6), but in 1826 as stated later in the book. Also, experts will be surprised to read about some obscure “Wahhabi pirate states of the Red Sea” (p. 3). One last mistake is worth pointing out. In the final chapter one reads that the Muslims generally disliked the mercantile life. Besides, Cavaliero argues that “one Indian ruler spoke for others when he said wars by sea were merchants’ affairs and of no concern to the prestige of the Kings” (p. 205). Most probably, the reason for such unfamiliarity with the historical realities of the East is the authors’ self-restriction to literary sources.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the author does present us with a well-written summary of the eighteenth and nineteenth century European sources. The list of “writers, artists, and composers mentioned in the text” at the end of the book provides very short but helpful information, and prevents the reader from occasional temporal and spatial de-contextualization. Since most students and Turkish historians of the Ottoman Empire would lack the familiarity of Roderick Cavaliero with the European literary sources from the earlier centuries, the book should be of particular interest to them. However, with its literarily strong narrative, it is an important contribution also to the general scholarship, and would be a valuable addition to any university library.

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