

Victorian Popular Fiction Association

Study Day

Women & the East: Gendered Narratives of Encounter in Victorian Popular Writing

G. d'Annunzio University, Chieti-Pescara, Italy (Host institution)
in collaboration with Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, UK

10th & 11th June 2022

Conference venue: Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne,
G. d'Annunzio University, Pescara, Italy

Organisers:

Claudia Capancioni (Bishop Grosseteste University)

Mariaconcetta Costantini (G. d'Annunzio University)

Mara Mattoscio (G. d'Annunzio University)

Keynote Speaker: Professor Julia Kuehn (The University of Hong Kong)

Call for Papers

This Study Day wants to reflect on the allure of travelling to the East in the nineteenth century – from the Balkans to the Middle and Far East – by exploring stories of travel and narratives of encounter in Victorian popular writings, both fictional and non-fictional. Special attention will be paid to the female gendering of these narratives meant in two different ways: either as the gender identity of Victorian travellers who authored travelogues or fictions based on their experiences in the East, or as the representation of Eastern femininity in the age's writings. What the Study Day aims to explore is the extent to which popular writers of the time drew on this particular combination of femininity and Eastern imaginary, producing enthralling stories that sometimes take the shape of proper fictional works, other times appear as narratives embedded in travelogues, essays or (auto)biographies.

In the Victorian era, the East was a source of inspiration for many artists, intellectuals, and writers, and a popular feature in publishing. The increasing complexity of the geo-politics of the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia did not deter the British leisure industry that had found in steam locomotion a means to transform travelling and its accessibility. Journeys to the religious and archaeological sites of Egypt and the Holy Land became more comfortable, faster, and safer. Turkey and Syria attracted several visitors, even though southern Anatolia remained conceived as *terra incognita* until the following century. Rising numbers of explorers faced physical hardships and local people's hostility in remote Balkan areas, such as Northern Albania. Asian outposts of the British Empire like India became important destinations of people travelling for either work or pleasure, while the lure of China, South-East Asia and Japan was strongly felt.

What all these lands shared, in Victorian popular imagination, was an exoticism tinged with Orientalist clichés. Though consisting of a vast array of cultures and populations, the East was also an imaginary construct made of mysteries and Arabian Nights fantasies, sheiks and emperors, dangers and luxuries, divided into two macro-categories: the Islamized and partly Arabized Middle East, which also included Egypt and some Balkan areas, and the fabulous Far East, loosely associated with opium, lotus-flowers, tigers and headhunters. Orientalist stereotypes abounded in popular fictions of

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the time which drew largely on Eastern folklore and narratives embedded in travelogues. For its part, travel writing was influenced by fictional depictions of the East, which were either attached romantic and sensual connotations, or highly sensationalized. The example of the Balkans is revealing. A culturally heterogeneous area of Europe inhabited by different populations, the Balkans tended to be perceived as an imaginary expanse of mysteries and bloodshed, which inspired fantasy stories and gothic narratives based on local folklore, such as LeFanu's and Stoker's vampire stories. Similarly, the passion for Egyptology nourished thrilling fictions of curse and persecution, such as Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), while interethnic relations in India triggered provocative representations of women in Kipling's short stories, Dinah Craik's *The Half-Caste* (1851) and M. E. Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1862-3). Rich in sensationalism were also the travelogues composed by women who visited Eastern regions. Among the latter, it is worth remembering Edith Durham's fictionalized reports of her Northern Albanian explorations, Amelia Edwards's *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (1877), Sophia Lane Poole's and Lucie Duff Gordon's letters based on their journeys to Egypt, and Isabella Lucy Bird's exciting reportages of her trips to China, Japan, and the Malay Peninsula. These narratives were the products of a fertile 'dialogue' between popular literature and travel reports, which is found also in representations of other Eastern regions.

The focus for this Study Day will be on narratives by women writers or writings about women of the East. The centrality of female identity is due to the increasing relevance of the Woman Question during the century and the new opportunities for travel Victorian women gained, moving unchaperoned off the beaten tracks. Both as writers and subjects, women are instrumental to the development of new approaches to otherness, owing to their experiences of exclusions as the 'other', the alien in patriarchal systems divided along gender lines. If British women sought autonomy in travelling showing a special sympathy for and understanding of ethnocultural diversity, the observation and portrayal of Eastern women in travelogues and fictions encouraged reflection on patriarchal gender modelling, as evidenced by popular representations of veiled women, harems, sati, or domestic female incarceration.

This Study Day intersects three essential aspects of popular Victorian culture – the changing understanding of gender roles, the travelling conditions in their embodied and narrated incarnations, and the Victorian perception of the Eastern space/time – as a way of illuminating some lesser explored driving forces of societal transformation in Victorian times. It aims to delve deep into the common prejudiced adoption of an Orientalist approach (in Said's terms) as well as into alternative approaches to religious and cultural otherness which, especially in the case of women, frequently led to self-exploration, the questioning of patriarchy in its diverse cultural manifestations (e.g., Islamic, Hinduist, Christian, etc.) and the rethinking of gender roles and education.

Speakers will examine connections between women and the East in relation to a variety of Victorian popular texts: novels and short stories, (auto)biographies, journal essays and contributions to periodicals, travelogues embedding narratives of travel, encounter and cross-cultural exchange.

We hope this study day event will offer many opportunities for sharing ideas, projects, and connections also through activities that we are planning, which include a conference meal and trips to museums.

We invite proposals for individual papers of 20 minutes. Please submit proposals of 300 words to mariaconcetta.costantini@unich.it and claudia.capancioni@bishopg.ac.uk by Friday 21st January 2022. All proposals should include your name, email address and academic affiliation (if applicable).