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Secret Sins of the Orient: Creating a (Homo)Textual Context for Reading Byron's *The Giaour*

Jeffrey L. Schneider

In his seminal study *Orientalism*, Edward Said notes that, when the late-nineteenth-century Westerner looked toward the East, the Orient he or she confronted was by and large “a textual universe” (52). The Western vision of the Orient was, according to Said, largely constructed from bits and pieces of exotic tales of “Oriental” manners, mythologies, and inscrutability collected in the books and manuscripts of European Orientalists. Indeed, for British writers and readers, this confluence of the text and the East was a well-established tradition, and, to the extent that the Orient was a Western construction, I would argue that it may always already have been a textual universe. I want to begin by expanding upon this conception in order to demonstrate that the Orient that emerges from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature might also be regarded as a (homo)textual universe.

In defining “homotextuality,” Rudi C. Bleys notes that it “manifests itself more often in rhetorical style than in content. A document becomes ‘of homosexual interest’ by its use of carefully chosen adjectives, by the adoption of particular ‘signifying’ images, names or terms, or by its connection to an Orientalist or Primitivist trope” (11). In using the term “homotextuality” to form my notion of a (homo)textual universe, I focus first on the way the sexual excesses inscribed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Oriental discourses served to open up “queer” spaces in Romantic literature, while analyzing the degree to which the master narrative of British colonial domination was in part dependent on narratives of the sexual degeneracy of the Other. More specifically, I concentrate on Lord Byron’s “Oriental Tale” *The Giaour* as a case study both to illustrate the workings of homotextuality and to examine the degree to which Byron in his use of these tropes implicates himself in the British imperial project.

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I. READING EASTERN (HOMO)TEXTUALITY

For the Westerner, Oriental textuality often carried with it a marked erotic charge. Turning again to Said: “The Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest. [. . .]What they looked for often—correctly, I think—was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden” (190). In explicating this quotation, D. L. Macdonald asserts that Said “ascribes this [search for a different type of sexuality] partly to the greater degree of sexual freedom men, especially homosexual men, enjoyed there” (61). Macdonald’s reading of Said is problematic on a number of levels. First, Said never explicitly discusses the way in which Orientalism and homosexuality intersect. If anything, Said seems to be anxious about specifying the exact nature of the “unobtainable in Europe” and the “different type of sexuality” of which he speaks. It is precisely at this point that Said’s formulation of a textual universe needs to be interrogated and expanded—or, more precisely, to be queered.

Although Said seems unable and/or unwilling to move beyond euphemisms in his discussion of “Oriental sex,” the British had no problem whatsoever in identifying the form of sexuality they most often, and traditionally, associated with the Orient—sodomy (more specifically, sodomitical relations between men). Said’s relative silence on this point represents a fundamental limitation of his analysis. In many ways, his evasion reinforces both homophobic and Orientalist tropes—homophobic in the sense that Said’s silence may be read as a contemporary rearticulation of what Louis Crompton has called the British “‘unspeakability’ tradition” concerning homosexual or same-sex sodomy. Crompton establishes the tradition’s origins in British jurisprudence by quoting from William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, in which Blackstone refuses to dwell upon a subject “the very mention of which is a disgrace to human nature” and instead insists that “[i]t will be more eligible to imitate in this respect the delicacy of our English law, which treats it, in its very indictments, as a crime not fit to be named: ‘*peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum*’” (20). The most peculiar aspect of these linguistic evasions is that Blackstone fails to recognize that the act without a name was actually named any number of ways, ranging from “*non nominandum*” to the “foreign vice” (from John Armstrong’s *The Oeconomy of Love*, in which the writer declares “Britons, for shame! Be male and female still./ Banish this foreign vice; it grows not here”; qtd. in Crompton 54). Readers, particularly those well versed in Oriental literature, were undoubtedly aware that *sodomy* was the word lurking behind these periphrastic shields. Moreover, I argue, following Said, that readers expected to find tales of a different kind of sexuality, an expectation that helped sustain the market for Oriental texts.

Said, in fact, argues that “Oriental sex”—in the most general sense—“was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture, with the result that readers and writers could have [. . .] it without necessarily going to the Orient” (190). It would seem that the marketability of these tales and the “unspeakability” tradition were at odds. It is, however, the distance between the non-Christian East and Christian Britain that allowed writers to maintain both their own and their readers’ respectability (delicacy) in their writing/reading; after all, one could write/read freely about the sodomitical customs of far distant lands by assuming the ethnographic guise of purely objective reporters and consumers of Oriental manners and practices. It is then the geographical—but above all the imagined moral and social—remove of the East that allowed the unspeakable sin of same-sex sodomy to enter safely (through the backdoor as it were) into the British discourse community.

In terms of a discursive analysis, a cursory study of British literary production, dating back to at least the Renaissance, establishes that for both English writers and their reading audience the Orient was inexorably linked with sodomy. Alan Bray finds that in the seventeenth century, “Several travellers wrote detailed and horrified accounts of the homosexuality they witnessed in relatively more tolerant societies” (75). By the eighteenth century, sodomy was generally accepted as a foreign vice. Tobias Smollett in *The Adventures of Roderick Random* writes, “Eternal infamy the wretch confound / Who planted first, this vice on British ground!” (310).² In 1701 Daniel Defoe, in *The True-Born Englishman: A Satyr*, more precisely locates sodomy’s “original home” as either Turkey or “the Torrid Zone of Italy³ / Where blood ferments in Rapes and Sodomy” (qtd. in Rousseau 137).

Turkey was so closely associated with sodomy that allusions to its practice appear in numerous contexts. The anonymous writer of “The Whadamites: A Burlesque Poem” maintains that “I’m told, there hardly is a Turk, / In that most spacious tract of land, / But what this ART [sodomy] does understand” (McCormick 101). In arguing against an encroaching effeminacy, Mary Wollstonecraft warns her readers of the threat of “that destructive blast⁴ [sodomy] which so desolates Turkey, and renders the men, as well as the soil, unfruitful” (44). Remarking on the British insistence that same-sex sodomitical relations originated in Turkey, G. S. Rousseau observes that “if the [literary] record reveals anything, Turkey existed in a class of its own. Its exotic location and mythic image gave rise in Western Europe to tales of Ottoman homosexuality that have no parallel in any European country” (153). “Ottoman homosexuality” especially gave rise in the British imagination to tales of dissipated potentates and their eroticized courts in which all manner of sexual excess occurred.

Nigel Leask argues that the “absorption of the East in an unworldly dream of licentiousness makes it ripe for moral and economic appropriation by European colonial power” (21). And, as the ultimate mark of the Other’s licentiousness, homo-

sexual sodomy served the vital political function of symbolizing the Other's physical, moral, and cultural inferiority. Perceptions that Oriental men were sodomites—and, therefore, less than men in terms of British notions of normative masculinity—made them seem all the easier to conquer; against the masculine rigor and discipline of the British soldier, the effeminate softness of the Oriental sodomite simply stood no chance. Ultimately, this position rests on the British conviction that while sodomitical practices were endemic to the East they were virtually unheard of in Great Britain.

This position is especially problematic because much documentary evidence indicates that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Britain experienced a “sodomy paranoia” (Trumbach 113) that resulted in numerous public executions and pilloryings. Trumbach, in fact, observes that sixty men were hanged for sodomy in the period between 1800 and 1835 in England alone (112). Remarking on these executions, Ed Cohen maintains that “it appears that the coincidence of emerging definitions of normative sexual behavior [. . .] with aggressive private policing and prosecution by the reform societies [. . .] was instrumental in fomenting the legal and public execration of sodomy” (199). The execration of sodomy in the legal and public arenas was mirrored in the literary arena but with a marked and very important difference. For, although writers treated sodomy with the same fear and loathing as did the public at large, they completely removed it from a British setting and reconstituted it as the Oriental (foreign) vice, thus attempting to achieve with pen and paper what the gallows and pillory could not—the eradication of sodomy in Britain, if only through metaphoric-metonymic displacement. As for readers, the same public that sought to persecute homosexuals unrelentingly also read tales of Oriental sodomitical practices voraciously. The legal and public desire to eradicate homosexuality in Britain thus coexisted with the literary desire to bring it into imperial discourse.

A symptomatic reading of the figure of the Oriental sodomite—again understood as homosexual sodomite—offers some insight into these seemingly inconsistent desires. The necessary first step in such a reading is reconstructing the scene of trauma. For, as Žižek notes, “symptoms are meaningless traces [of trauma], their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth; that is the signifying frame which gives [them] their symbolic place and meaning” (55–56). The challenge lies in recreating a context that renders literary representations of the Oriental sodomite meaningful as symptoms of cultural trauma. On the surface, the executions and pilloryings of British sodomites may be read as the primary trauma, but they seem to be symptoms of a deeper and more traumatic violation. I argue that, for the British, sodomy understood as a foreign vice transplanted to their homeland violated an ideal of purity and virtue that existed in their imagined past. Sodomy was in

short a disease of the Oriental Other whose importation threatened to bring about social and cultural degeneration. The paradox here is that its importation through textual representation was not seen as a threat at all. Moreover, through displacement, the Western sodomite immediately carries the mark of the Other, so much so that in his difference from his fellow British men he arguably becomes inseparable from the figure of the Oriental homosexual sodomite.

In a symptomatic reading, the figure represents more than just a symptom of cultural trauma; it is the symptom functioning as *sinthome*. Žižek defines the *sinthome* as a “certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment: it is a signifier as a bearer of *jouissance*, enjoyment in [knowing]” (75). The British writer and reader’s thirst for tales of Oriental sexuality is indeed infused with a sense of Freudian perverse enjoyment—recalling Freud’s notion of horrified fascination as developed in the “Rat Man” case history. They may not have wanted to confront the reality of same-sex sexual desire in the metropole, but, once they read about its practice in the East, they could not stop reading. Their sense of enjoyment may have come from the glimpse that tales of Oriental sexuality offered into the dark, unspoken, and forbidden realms of sodomitical desire among men.

On a more theoretical level, their enjoyment might also be read as an expression of the pleasure generated in identifying an enemy in their defense of British values from the degenerative contagion of the Other. It is, in other words, the enemy embodied in and/or signified by the Oriental sodomite that threatens the British national way of life. Using Žižek as a model, we can say this figure then functions in an analogous way to the figure of the “Jew” in anti-Semitic ideology. According to Žižek, in fascist ideology, the “Jew” becomes nothing more than “the embodiment of a certain blockage—of the impossibility which prevents the society from achieving its full identity as a closed, homogeneous totality” (127). Like the “Jew,” the sodomite, who in practicing the foreign vice is always already to a degree marked as the Oriental Other, prevents the British nation-state from maintaining its collective fantasy of purity and virtue. Just as Žižek maintains that “the ‘Jew’ appears as an intruder who introduces from outside disorder, decomposition and corruption of the social edifice—it [the Jew] appears as an outward positive cause whose elimination would enable us to restore order, stability, and identity” (128), so the British regarded the sodomite as that which must be eliminated in order for their social order to be maintained. In order not to recognize the limits of their own symbolic universe, the British therefore displaced all that questioned their imagined purity and virtue onto the Other, constructing in the process the Oriental homosexual sodomite and imbuing him with all the qualities they most feared and loathed. In essence, they justified their domination of the Orient as a means of containing and disarming all that threatened their most powerful collective fantasy—nationhood. Ultimately, then, not only was the Orient for the British a fundamentally (homo)-

textual universe, but the literary construction of the Oriental homosexual sodomite also partly justified the imperial project.

II. NEW & DELIGHTFUL SPECTACLES—
(HOMO)TEXTUALIZING BYRON'S *THE GIAOUR*

Exploring the context in which Byron's *The Giaour* was produced and consumed is absolutely essential for reading and teaching this often-overlooked narrative poem. In order to read this poem as a cultural artifact, that is, the way the British ascribed certain sexual traits to the Orient must be considered. Such a project requires an archeology of sorts of the cultural signs and systems under which these traits were ascribed. Clearly, "queer" reading practices that insist on uncovering, to borrow from Eve Sedgwick, "the gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" (*Tendencies* 8) within heteronormative culture itself come into play. Reading this poem in such a register allows us to reconceive its importance in teaching the Byronic canon and in further examining the implications of British Romantic representations of sodomy. Queer theory has the potential to shift our pedagogical choices to this less-often-taught poem in order to help our students to understand better the ways in which literature, sociopolitical culture, and sexuality intersect in the early nineteenth century and thereby potentially transform preconceived notions about British Romanticism.

In 1809, when Byron set off for the East, he carried with him all the expectations and prejudices of a well-read English tourist. Leslie Marchand frames the nearly two years Byron spent abroad in terms of a "grand tour" (see 1: chs. 7 and 8). Elaborating on Marchand's general framework, Louis Crompton⁵ specifies that because the "conventional grand tour" of France and Italy was impossible because of the war with Napoleon, by January 1808 Byron had decided to travel to the "Orient instead and spoke of going as far as Persia and India" (111). Further, Crompton points out that in planning his Oriental tour Byron wrote to his attorney, John Hanson, of his "wish to study 'India and Asiatic policy and manners'" (111). In terms of his wish "to study," Byron already considered himself something of an expert on Eastern history. He in fact claimed to have read "Knolles, Cantimir—De Tott—Lady M. W. Montague—Hawkins's translation from Mignot's History of the Turks—the Arabian Nights—All travels or histories or books upon the East I could meet with, as well as Rycout, before I was *ten years old*" (qtd. in Crompton 111–12). Beyond this somewhat academic motivation for his travels, what emerges from Byron's letters is an equally compelling desire to see people, places, and things that form "a new & delightful spectacle to a stranger" (227).

As those of a tourist in the Orient—the proverbial stranger in a strange land—Byron's portraits of the people and places he has seen along the way read very much

like an exotic travelogue. One letter, written to his mother, contains a catalogue of exotic details: “[A] country [Albania] of the most picturesque beauty,” splendid palaces “too much ornamented with silk & gold,” the most magnificent dresses in the world, rooms paved with marble, and “1000 things more” that he has “neither time or *space* to describe” (“*In*” 226–29). This superabundance of splendor threatens to overwhelm him. He remarks, “I could tell you I know not how many incidents that I think would amuse you, but they crowd on my mind as much as would swell my paper, & I can neither arrange them in the one, or put them down on the other, except in the greatest confusion” (230). His confusion stems from an anxiety over how to represent the seemingly endless profusion of Oriental excesses. Here, words fail him. He has literally reached the limits of representational language, where certain “things” cannot be expressed.

Eventually, Byron finds that there really is no need to describe all that he has seen, because much of it has been described before. D. L. Macdonald contends that “Orientalism in Said’s sense was being established in Byron’s lifetime but the Orient Byron visited was already a textual universe” (60). Byron was indeed well aware of the textuality of the Orient—so much so that in a letter to Henry Drury, his tutor at Harrow, he comfortably reduces his travels to the barest details: “Well, my dear Sir, I have left my home and seen part of Africa & Asia and a tolerable portion of Europe—I have been with Generals and Admirals, Princes and Pachas [sic], Governors and Ungovernables, but I have not [. . .] paper to expatiate” (237). Byron arguably no longer feels the need “to expatiate,” for he later comments, “Greece ancient and modern you know too well to require description.” In the same letter, he also poses the question, “But why should I say more of these things [the topography of Troy]? Are they not written in the *Boke* of Gell?” (237–38).

This move not to rewrite what has already been written—an illustration of the anxiety of influence—appears in many of Byron’s letters. For example, as opposed to describing Constantinople, he refers John Hanson “to the various travellers who have scribbled on the subject” (243). Along the same lines, he comments to his mother, “Of Constantinople you have of course read fifty descriptions by sundry travellers, which are in general so correct that I have nothing to add on the Subject” (244).

Said writes, “In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone’s work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these” (177). This cultural register of Oriental signs and symbols allows certain facts and details to be left out. Thus Byron relies to varying degrees on the texts that precede his in order to complete his own, demonstrating the validity of Macdonald’s claim that by the early nineteenth century the Orient was indeed already a textual universe. And for Byron the Orient also opens up a space of textual possibility, repre-

sending an untapped vein of poetic subjects that the British reading public demanded. He, for instance, advises the Irish poet Thomas Moore to “[s]tick to the East; the oracle, [Madame de] Staël told me it was the only poetical policy. The North, South, and West have all been exhausted; but from the East, we have nothing but S**’s [Southey’s] unsaleables. [. . .] The little I have done is merely ‘a voice in the wilderness’ for you; and, if it has had any success, that also will prove that the public are orientalizing, and pave the path for you.”⁷ Like a colonial agent, Byron advocates abandoning regions whose resources have been exhausted in order to mine the East for poetic inspiration. Here, Byron also places himself firmly in a historical continuum, marking his place in the textual universe of the Orient as a prophet paving the way into an expanding literary market fed by the British reading public’s desire for Oriental tales. He envisions his own texts as fulfilling the needs of an already “orientalizing” public, whose appetites have been whetted by the same texts that Byron himself read before leaving for the Orient. Thus, although Byron relies on his readers’ familiarity with the already written text of the East, he recognizes their craving for even more fabulous and romantic Oriental tales and seeks to fulfill their desires.

To the degree that Byron relies upon and fails to interrogate British notions of the Orient, he may be said to participate in the maintenance of imperial discourse. He was certainly well versed in the (homo)textual nature of the East. According to Crompton,⁸ Byron was well aware of the sexual history of Turkey and that may have been one of the factors that most attracted him to that destination. Byron’s letters indicate that in Ottoman Albania and Turkey he did indeed find numerous examples of sexual excess of the sodomitical kind. That he expected to find such things is clear. Before leaving for the East, he writes his mother to say that “I have sent him [Joe Murray, one of his personal servants] and the boy [John Rushton, also in his service] back, pray shew the lad any kindness as he is my great favourite, I would have taken him on (but you *know boys* are not *safe* amongst the Turks)” (221–22). The parenthetical comment expresses both Byron’s assumptions about Turkish sexual depravity and also the degree to which such assumptions were considered common knowledge—his mother after all “knows” that “boys are not safe among the Turks.” Not surprisingly, Byron later finds that his expectations are true: “In England the vices in fashion are whoring & drinking, in Turkey, sodomy & smoking, we prefer a girl and a bottle, they a pipe and a pathic.” He later adds, “I like the Greeks, who are plausible rascals, with all the Turkish vices without their courage”(238). His attribution of sodomy to the Turkish is likely as much a reflection of cultural prejudice as it is a first-hand observation, demonstrating the degree to which Byron was influenced by the literature he read. In other words, like all would-be Orientalists, Byron finds exactly what his reading had led him to believe he would find. The Orient Byron visited would in fact always live up to his desires because it was largely constructed in his mind before he left England.

The place in which the British fantasies of “Ottoman homosexuality” are most nearly realized for Byron is at the court of Ali Pasha—the despotic ruler of Albania. In *Byron: A Biography*, Marchand, indulging in a moment of Orientalist excess, concludes that the visit to the Pasha’s court “was indeed for Byron the high point in his voyage, and he ever remembered it as something approaching the *Arabian Nights*⁹ in the magic of barbarian splendour and strangeness” (1: 208). Although Byron describes meeting Ali Pasha in numerous letters, in terms of this essay, two versions that he writes for his mother are the most significant.

The first appears in a letter written on November 12, 1809, in which Byron recalls

[Ali Pasha] said he was certain I was a man of birth because I had small ears, curling hair, & little white hands, and expressed himself pleased with my appearance and garb. He told me to consider him as a father whilst I was in Turkey, & said he looked on me as his son—Indeed he treated me like a child, sending me almonds & sugared sherbet, fruit & sweetmeats 20 times a day—He begged me to visit him often, and at night when he was more at leisure. (227–28)

Ali Pasha, it seems, has effeminized Byron not only by describing him with markedly feminine characteristics—“small ears, curling hair, & little white hands”—but by indulging him as if he were a court favorite. Notice, however, that the simile “he treated me like a child” is Byron’s, so that what appears to be the blatantly sexual nature of the older man’s attentions, which he recalls as if it were a blueprint for a pederastic—not to mention incestuous—seduction, is a fictional frame (particularly given Byron’s insistence that he was being treated not only as a child but also as a son). Moreover, what Byron describes as being treated like a child would not necessarily echo the treatment of children in Ali Pasha’s court, and perhaps it is Byron who can only interpret generous gifts between men in an adult/child incest frame. The most surprising aspect of this scene is that Byron wrote so openly about it to his mother—who, as he himself noted, had some knowledge of Turkish manners.

Perhaps Byron was providing her with a first-hand vision of the decadent East and excessive Oriental sensuousness. Or, perhaps, in an unguarded moment, he had allowed himself to say too much. The latter seems to be the case, for, believing that the original letter had been lost, he writes again of Ali Pasha some months later. Here, however, he radically revises his description: “[T]he Pacha [sic . . .] desired his respects to my mother, and said he was sure I was a man of high birth because I had ‘*small ears, curling hair, and white hands*’!!! He was very kind to me, begged me to consider him as a father, and gave me a guard of forty soldiers through the forests of Arcania” (249). Byron has elided any indication—except the feminine description—that their relationship goes beyond that of a surrogate father to his surrogate son. Byron has, in effect, transformed a sexual predator into a paternal protector. This move is absolutely necessary because it is one thing for Byron, as a Western observer, to remark upon the behavior of Ali Pasha and quite another to implicate

himself in it. In both his letters and the “Oriental Tales,” there are certain things, in other words, that Byron—the British aristocrat—simply cannot directly say. He must rely instead on a code of indirect reference,¹⁰ especially in describing expressions of sodomy and sodomitical relations among men. By explicitly naming or describing certain sodomitical acts, Byron would also be admitting too close a knowledge of their practice, which in turn would render him suspect. Crompton contends that Byron may very well have feared that his own homosexual proclivities would mark him: “Byron was a very brave man, brave often to the point of recklessness, and fear is a rare emotion in his correspondence. But accusations of homosexuality were something even brave men flinched at in his day. [. . .] Byron may have feared exposure for some indiscreet letter or act” (125).

Byron therefore practices a circumspection not evidenced in the original letter to his mother and leaves any reference to nonnormative sexual practice virtually unspoken in his “Oriental Tales.” That is not to say that there is no mention of nonheteronormative practices in these poems, but that these vices are either obliquely alluded to or barely suggested. Just as his omission of a description of Constantinople is predicated on the belief that his reader already knows the city from other texts, Byron thus depends on the ability of his readers—well versed in the vices of the Orient—to fill in the gaps of these poems. Recognizing that the Orient was fundamentally perceived not only as a textual universe but also as a (homo)textual universe thus provides a context for reading (decoding) queer elements at play in Byron’s poem *The Giaour*.

As has been established, by setting *The Giaour* in the Orient Byron creates a set of expectations in the mind of his reading public. And the specific location—Greece under Turkish rule—carried definite nonheteronormative connotations, particularly in light of the British beliefs concerning Ottoman homosexuality. Aware of the notion that Turkey was generally associated with sodomy and sodomitical relations, Byron fulfills his readers’ expectations of finding sexual excess: “There [in Greece] Passion riots in her pride, / And Lust and Rapine wildly reign / To darken o’er the fair domain” (59–61).

Such unbridled manifestations of sexuality are obviously a blight on the face of Greece. He takes this notion even further, stating that Turkish vice has enslaved the Greeks:

Slaves—nay, the bondsmen of a Slave,
And callous save to crime;
Stained with each evil that pollutes.
Mankind, where least above the brutes;
Without even savage virtue blest,
Without one free or valiant breast,
Still to the neighboring ports they waft
Proverbial wiles, and ancient craft. (153–58)

Evils that pollute, “proverbial wiles,” and “ancient craft”—most likely an allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah—can all be read as symbols of sodomy. For Byron, the Turks have transformed Greece into a place in which passions run wild and imported vice enslaves. This representation, capitalizing on the long-held British belief that Turkey is the locus of sodomy, clearly emerges out of the British understanding of the Orient as a (homo)textual universe.

Consequently, Byron’s choice of setting offers the reader the possibility of examining the relationship between the Giaour and Hassan in markedly queer terms. On a purely textual level, the conflict between these men is easily normalized in terms of an oft-repeated narrative of a deadly rivalry over a woman. On a subtextual level, however, this rivalry takes on decidedly nonheteronormative implications. Byron, in fact, repeatedly portrays the meeting between the Giaour and Hassan in terms of a marriage—a complete inversion of the primary symbol of heteronormativity. When Hassan rides off to battle, Byron writes, “’Tis said he goes to woo a bride, / More true than her who left his side” (533–34). One reading of these lines is that Hassan is riding off to become the bridegroom of death—a reading that is supported by line 718, in which a page, after Hassan has been killed, he returns to tell Hassan’s mother, “Lady, a fearful bride thy Son hath wed.”

Byron’s depiction of the battle between the Giaour and Hassan, however, suggests quite a different reading:

But Love itself could never pant
For all that Beauty sighs to grant
With half the fervour Hate bestows
Upon the last embrace of foes,
When grappling in the fight they fold
Those arms that ne’er shall lose their hold.
Friends meet to part; Love laughs at faith;
True foes, once met, are joined till death! (647–54)

Remarking upon these lines, David Seed contends, “Byron skillfully alludes to the marriage service, specifically to heighten the antagonism of the combatants joined by hostility, and more generally to strengthen the poem’s thematic link between love and death” (23). I argue that the allusion to the marriage ceremony—the joining of the Giaour to Hassan till death—strengthens the bond between the two men. Their fervent and last embrace becomes the ultimate symbol of true communion between men.

Here, Eve Sedgwick’s conception of homoerotic triangles proves quite instructive. Based on René Girard’s notion of triangular desire, Sedgwick’s main argument is that male homosexual desire in nineteenth-century British literature was often filtered through heterosexual plot/narrative devices, one of the most common being the love triangle in which two men vie for the love of one woman. Particularly noteworthy in this context is her underscoring of Girard’s determination that “in any

erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent” (21). In these terms, Leila becomes the vehicle through which the Giaour and Hassan can express their desires—whether born of love or hate—for each other. Her dead body¹¹ becomes the link that allows these men the possibility of communion. Leila, in other words, had to die for the inverted marriage between the Giaour and Hassan to occur. Although her presence (or in this case absence) is meant to heterosexualize the narrative, in that avenging her death becomes the basis for their relationship, it is not wholly effective, for the effects of the unnatural attachment between the Giaour and Hassan remain.

Indeed, just as Byron demonstrates that Turkish vice has contributed to the decline of Greece, he indicates that the product of this inverted marriage is degeneration and death. Byron’s portrait of Hassan’s palace after his death amply illustrates this point:

No serf is seen in Hassan’s hall;
 The lonely Spider’s thin gray pall
 Waves slowly widening o’er the wall;
 The Bat builds in his Haram bower,
 And in the fortress of his power
 The Owl usurps the beacon—tower;
 The wild-dog howls o’er the fountain’s brim,
 With baffled thirst, and famine, grim;
 For the stream has shrunk from its marble bed,
 Where the weeds and the desolate dust are spread.
 ’Twas sweet of yore to see it play
 And chase the sultriness of day,
 As springing high the silver dew
 Its whirls fantastical flew. (288–301)

Not only has the palace fallen into decay, but the fountain that was its centerpiece—obviously a phallic symbol—has stopped flowing, been rendered impotent.

The true measure of degeneracy and death is, however, the wasted life of the Giaour himself. His self-portrait is telling in this regard:

The withered frame, the ruined mind,
 The wrack by passion left behind,
 A shrivelled scroll, a scattered leaf.
 Seared by the autumn blast of grief! (1253–56)

This is a depiction of a completely ruined man, dissipated by an excessive passion that he describes as being like “the lava flood / That boils in Aetna’s breast” (1101–02) and wracked by the guilt of some unspeakable deed (801). That the Giaour

ends his life alone in a monastery is not surprising. He expresses a belief that men should take “one mate, and one alone” (1171). Herein lies the nature of his consuming regret, for in killing his rival he becomes joined not to Leila but to Hassan (till death). Like the monks with whom he lives, he thus exists completely cut off from the realm of heteronormative sexual relations. In the end, he is left alone, haunted by the ghost of a dead woman and a dead man. Ultimately, then, the *Giaour's* travels through and relations with the Orient—that place of sexual excess and sodomy—have destroyed him: an expression of a fear that, according to Said, every European traveler felt (166).

I begin and end my discussion of *The Giaour* with the Orient because I want to underscore the importance of place in queering this poem. For, in order to queer *The Giaour* or, for that matter, the other “Oriental Tales,” the way in which the British ascribed certain sexual traits to the Orient must be considered. Essentially, for Byron and his readers, the place of the poem also inherently creates a space in the poem for nonnormative desires to be expressed; after all, in the British collective imagination, sexual excess and the Orient were inextricable terms. Byron's choice of setting can thus be read as a means of alerting his reader to the “queer” possibilities at work in the text. But, because such things simply cannot be openly said—largely because of the insistence on the unspeakability of sodomitical discourses—his readers must assemble from a word here and a line there these alternate tales of the Orient. In essence, it is precisely because the Orient is so clearly constructed as a (homo)textual universe that such a hermeneutic is possible.

NOTES

1. Variations of this phrase were coined by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, but its first documented use in English occurred in 1631, when the Lord High Steward in his address to the court regarding the charges of sodomy against the Earl of Castlehaven used the phrase to demand the death penalty for the accused. Ed Cohen, in his 1993 study *Talk on the Wilde Side*, quotes directly from the original court records: “As for the *Crimen Sodomiticum* [. . .] I shall not paraphrase upon it, since it is of so abominable and vile a nature (that as the indictment truly expresses it, *Crimen inter Christianos non nominandum*) it is a crime not named among Christians” (108).

2. Michael Foot, in *The Politics of Paradise: A Vindication of Byron*, indicates that Byron had also read this text during his early education.

3. The anonymous author of the tract *The Effeminacy of Our Men's Dress and the Manners, Particularly Their Kissing Each Other* characterizes Italy as “the *Mother and Nurse of Sodomy*” (McCormick 139).

4. Carol H. Poston, the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, writes in a footnote that this is a reference to “[t]he dry south wind, laden with dust, known as the simoom or samum” (44n2). Wollstonecraft's insistence that the “blast renders men, as well as the soil, unfruitful” reads, to me, as a coded reference to sodomy—the Turkish vice—which ultimately results in sterility. In terms of human reproduction, the soil then may be regarded as an indirect reference to Turkish women.

5. See chapter 3 in *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in Nineteenth-Century England*.

6. A reference to the dismal sales of Southey's Oriental epics *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *The Curse of Kehma*.

7. From a letter dated August 28, 1813.

8. See particularly pages 111–18 in *Byron and Greek Love*.

9. This allusion to the *Arabian Nights* represents another example of the intertextuality at work in Orientalist discourse.

10. Crompton quotes from a letter written to Byron by Charles Skinner Matthews that the particular code used between these men was “the mysterious, that style in which more is meant than meets the eye” (128).

11. For a very different reading of the meaning of Leila's dead body, I recommend Joseph Lew's well-researched and erudite essay “The Necessary Orientalist? *The Giaour* and Nineteenth-Century Imperialist Misogyny.”

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